

**KENYA**

**The archaeology of the Cherangani Hills, Northwest Kenya**

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**Abstract**

The archaeology of the Cherangani Hills, Northwest Kenya, is poorly known despite its strategically important location given current models of Kalenjin history and the spread of food production into East Africa. This paper reports on previous archaeological research in the region and outlines the results of the authors first season of field work. New insights into the precolonial irrigation systems of the Pokot are discussed and the discovery of a number of rock shelters with significant archaeological potential is reported.

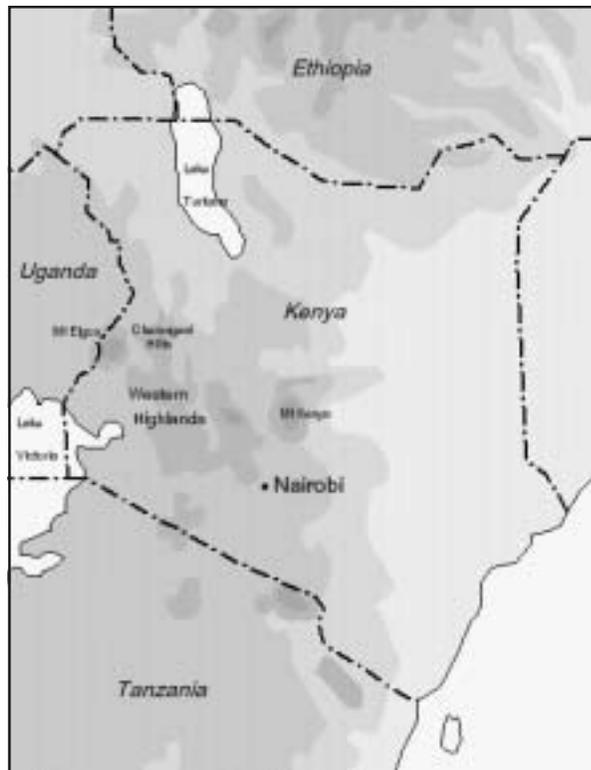
**Introduction**

Archaeologically the highlands to the west of the Kenyan Rift Valley remain underexplored. This is particularly true of the Cherangani Hills and surrounding areas (Figure 1). The pioneering work of John Sutton (1973) remains the baseline for any study in this region. However, much of this work is of a preliminary nature in that it deals with disparate sites, and focuses on the more southerly parts of the region. Excavations by Chapman (1966) and Bower (1975) at Mt Elgon, and Hivernel (1983) at Ngenyn near Lake Baringo have, to some extent, expanded our knowledge in the north of this region, though these too pose many more questions than they answer. This lack of detailed archaeological research to the north of the Uasin Gishu Plateau, while understandable given the region's remoteness, is notable, given that numerous models of East African history posit various migrations and/or routes of contact which pass southwards from the Lake Turkana region and into the elevated parts of the Rift and be-

yond (Ambrose 1982:112; Bower 1991:74; Gifford-Gonzalez 1998:166, 2000:100-103; Marshall 2000:200; Ehret 2002:119; Lane 2004:247). The Rift north of Baringo, the Kerio Valley and the Cherangani Hills thus represent a region through which the early food producing peoples of the 'Pastoral Neolithic' must have passed (or at least passed very close to) and where they may well have lingered. Despite this, the region remains archaeological *terra incognita*.

Inhabited by the Pokot and Sengwer (or Charangani)<sup>1</sup> in the western and central parts, and the Marakwet to the east (Figure 2), the Cherangani region also seems likely to have a pivotal role in Kalenjin history. If we accept Sutton's reconstruction of southern Nilotic history, it is to these more northerly regions that at least some of the 'Sirikwa' were dispersed and into which they were absorbed. While Sutton's reconstructions are speculative, if plausible, it seems hard to deny that this region would have remained something of a heartland, or at least a reserve, from which various southern Nilotic groups have expanded and into which they have been

**Figure 1.** East Africa showing the highlands (darker), including the Cherangani Hills.



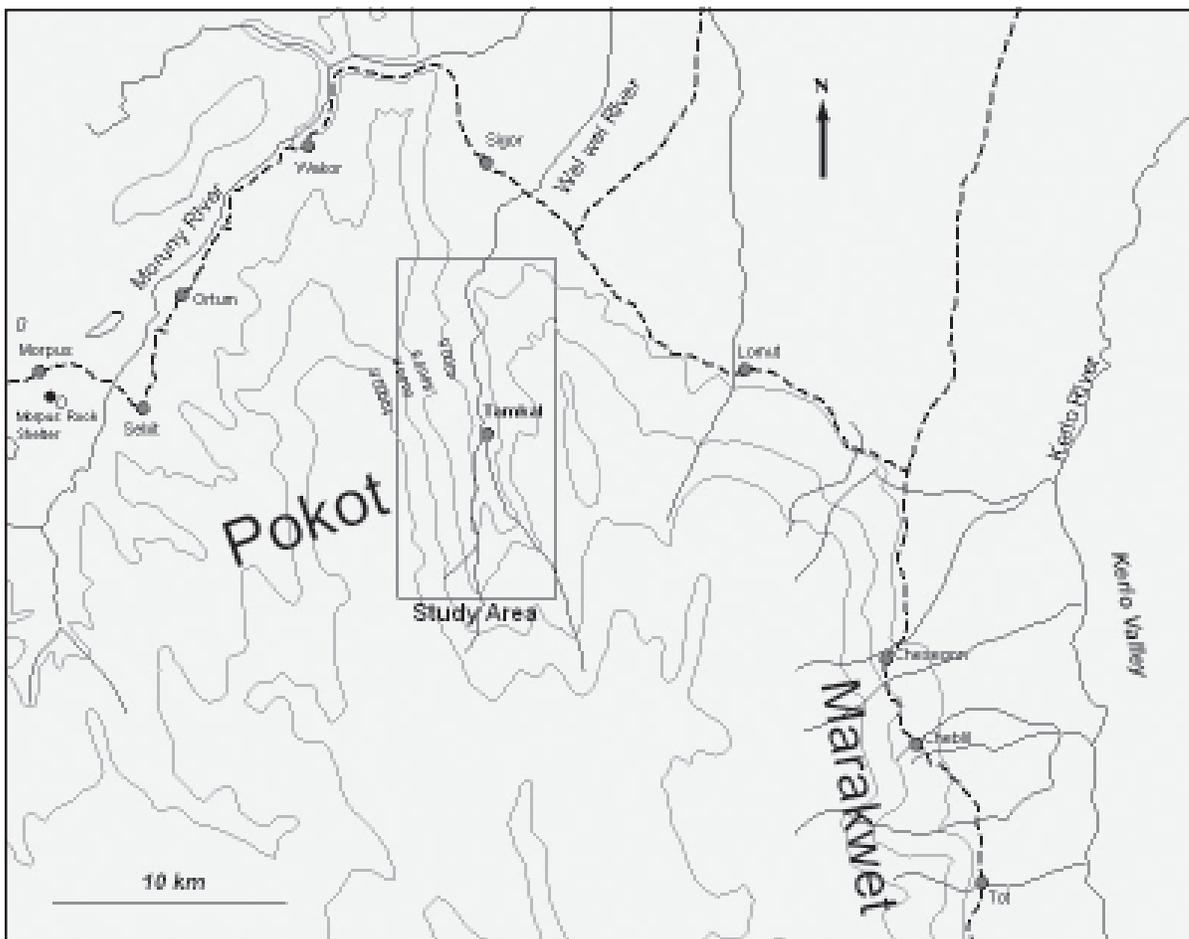
absorbed at times of hardship. This is not to say that the first food producers in this region were southern Nilotes, indeed interaction and assimilation between various ethnolinguistic groups are common in this part of the world and there is significant linguistic evidence for the early presence of southern Cushitic speakers in or around this area (Ehret 1971:39, 48; Sutton 1973:15). However, the current economy of the area and the tantalising hints at its antiquity suggest that this region may have played an important role in linking early pastoral communities to the agricultural and forest produce upon which they so often rely. Unsuitable for a purely pastoral economy, the peoples of this region are primarily agriculturalists or foragers, though they tend to retain the strong pastoral ideology common to all Kalenjin. Importantly, historical and ethnographic accounts relate how the peoples of this region have consistently engaged in a two way process whereby agriculturalists

become pastoralists and *vice versa* (Beech 1911:4; Anderson 1988, 1989; Waller 1988; Spear 1993; Östberg 2004; Davies 2005). Elsewhere I have argued that this process of economic specialisation and cross-economic interaction has been instrumental in the development of intensive agricultural practices in the region (Davies 2005; see also Östberg 2004) and it is these practices which have inspired much of the limited academic interest in the Cherangani Hills, including my own ongoing research.

**Previous Research**

A large portion of the academic work conducted in the northern part of Kenya’s western highlands has focussed on the Kerio valley and the indigenous, pre-colonial irrigation systems of the Marakwet. Much of this work has been carried out by geographers and anthropologists with a clear em-

**Figure 2.** The northern Cherangani Hills showing the study area.



phasis on the contemporary management of the system rather than its history (Ssenyonga 1983; Adams 1996; Adams et al. 1997; Watson 2004). Östberg's (2004) account of the development of the Marakwet irrigation system provides us with interesting historical details concerning the dynamics of trade and economic specialisation within the Kerio valley and their likely impact on the development of intensive agriculture. However, while I generally support his developmental scheme, it clearly lacks detailed archaeological support. The work of Soper (1983) remains the only archaeological foray into this region. His work details the technical construction of the irrigation system and makes some basic comments on chronology derived from observations of the spatial arrangement of the furrows and oral histories. However, no detailed excavations have been undertaken in an attempt to test his conclusions. Sutton's excavations of stone houses and terraced fields at Tambach, at the very southern end of the Kerio valley (away from the major areas of irrigation), are interesting but do little to enhance our understanding of the history of the complex irrigation system to the north. Furthermore, allusions to a connection between Sirikwa holes, the stone houses in Elgeyo, and the stone house platforms of the Marakwet are tantalising but unproven (Sutton 1973:141).

To the west of Marakwet the area inhabited by the hill or agricultural Pokot has received almost no archaeological attention. Often grouped alongside the Marakwet as 'intensive' cultivators, the irrigation system of the Pokot was cursorily mentioned by Beech (1911:15), resulting in the misplaced inclusion of the Pokot<sup>2</sup>, as an example of a 'loose hydraulic society', in Wittfogel's famous *Oriental Despotism* (1957:166). Despite this, their irrigation system has failed to attract even the modest attention paid to the comparable Marakwet system. A brief, unpublished consultancy report documented the layout and technical attributes of the system in the early 1980s, but made no attempt to assess its history or development<sup>3</sup>. The only archaeological surveys conducted in this area have been at best scattered in their coverage and remain unpublished.

In 1979 Peter Robertshaw produced an unpublished report for the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) detailing his brief excursion into the region. Of note are those sites to the north and west of Kapcherop in the southern foothills of the Cherangani Hills. These include various rock shelters which pro-

duced surface finds of cord-rouletted pottery, presumed similar to recent Okiek ceramics (Blackburn 1973), and two iron smelting sites of an indeterminate age both with large concentrations of slag, ore and tuyère and one with the outline of a furnace still visible. Sirikwa holes are also numerous in the area, including a number on Kipsait mountain which, at an altitude of over 2925m, represents both the most northerly and highest known examples of this tradition. Of particular interest are a large number of stone cairns at Kaisungurr which were investigated by amateur archaeologists in the early 1960s. However, details of these excavations are at best patchy and finds appear to have been few (Sutton 1973:107). As Robertshaw noted, these cairns clearly warrant further investigation.

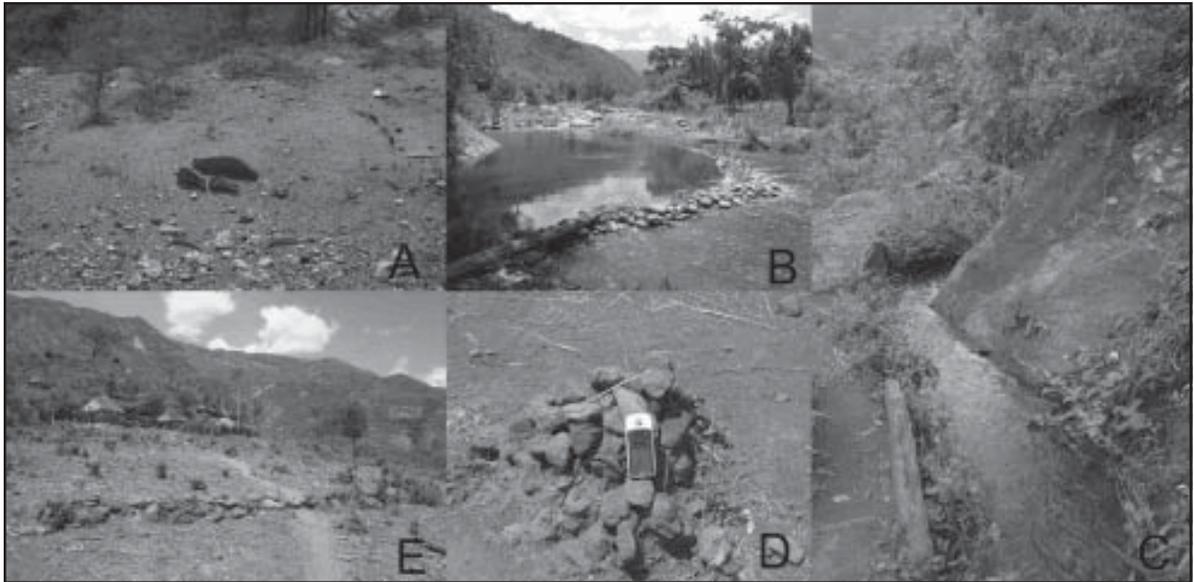
Moving northwards into West Pokot District, Robertshaw (1979) recorded a series of rockshelters at Morpus just off the main Kepenguria-Lodwar highway (Figure 2.). Here he collected iron slag and samples of twisted-cord rouletted pottery, also likely to be related to modern Pokot ceramics. In the Tamkal valley he recorded two rock shelters, one of which had been test excavated by an unknown archaeologist; neither produced any informative surface finds, though Robertshaw noted that the Wei wei valley might be worth further investigation given that Pokot oral traditions cite this valley as their original homeland.

### Current Research (the 2006 season)

Inspired by the current interest in East African 'intensive agriculture' (Sutton and Widgren 2004), in January 2006 I embarked on a first season of fieldwork aimed at assessing the age and development of intensive agricultural systems in the northern Cherangani Hills. Work concentrated on the Tamkal valley (Muino and Wei Wei locations, Sigor division) (Figure 2) where 65 major irrigation channels were mapped with GPS. These range from a few hundred metres in length to several kilometres and total approximately 77 km. Technologically, these irrigation furrows are broadly comparable to those of the Marakwet though, given their different geographical setting, they resolve themselves into two forms, distinct in terms of both construction and management.

These two classes might be termed hill furrows and valley furrows. Hill furrows are led off the sea-

**Figure 3.** A: house platform showing kerb and hearth stones; B: stone lined furrow; C: furrow off-take dam; D: small field clearance cairn; E: stone terracing.



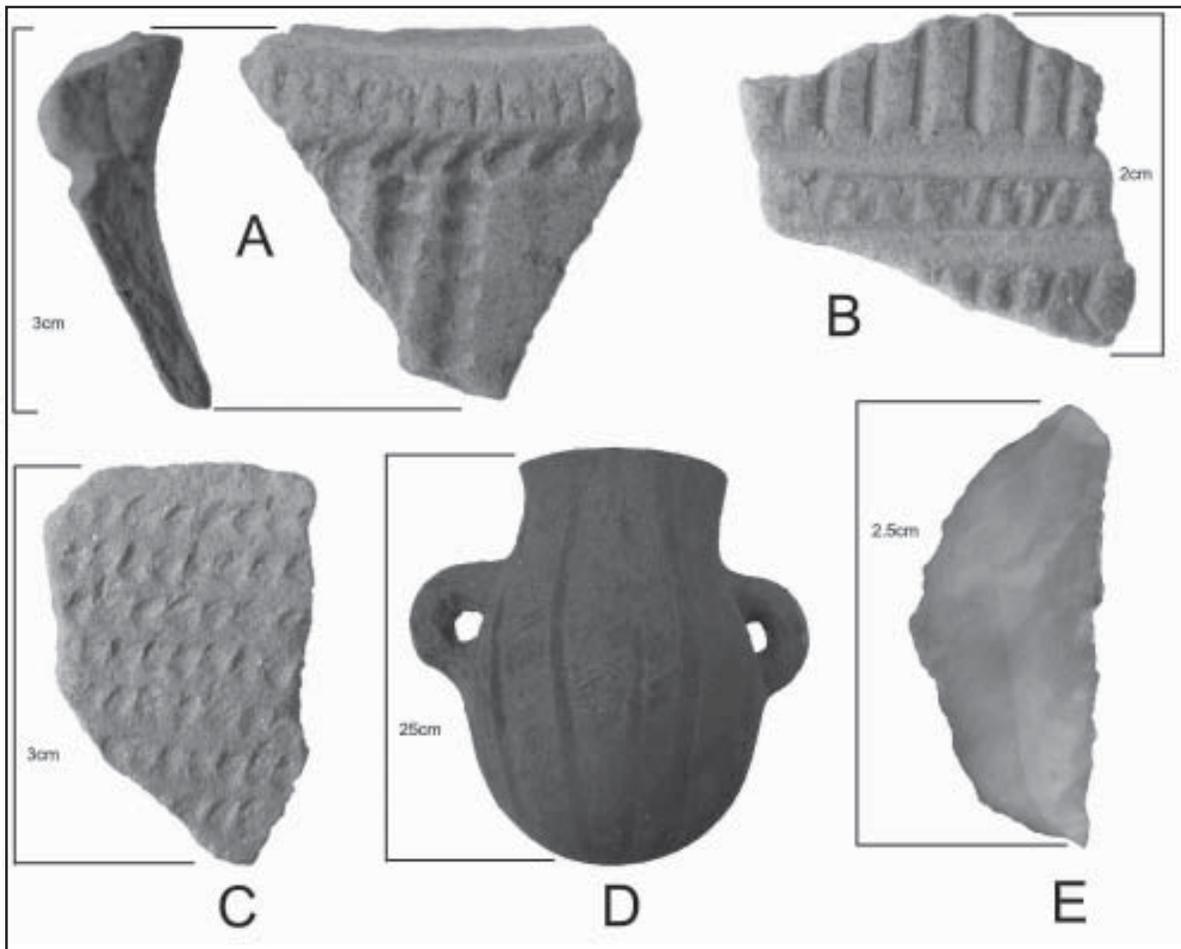
sonal streams which descend the valley sides. These furrows are generally contoured out of the stream gully - often following incredibly ingenious routes, cascading down rock faces and winding under and around boulders, with small man-made aqueducts not uncommon. Once out of the steep gulley, construction becomes simpler, with the furrow consisting of a small gravel-lined channel cut into the hill side and often supported on the downhill side by a small man-made embankment. In Marakwet these contoured hill furrows tend to run considerable distances, embankments are large and often stone lined and the channels tend to span half a meter or more. In the Tamkal valley, however, the majority of these furrows are narrow, with only small earthen embankments and are rarely contoured around more than two or three hill spurs (known as 'korok'). They generally culminate in being led down the crest of one of these spurs, allowing the furrow to serve cultivators on either side, thus maximising the area of potentially irrigable land. These furrows are very simple to construct and are generally confined to the territory of no more than two clan sections, which has the advantage of making construction and management relatively easy. Exceptions to this include Chepolol and Sowakagh furrows which, while taken low down from the valley streams, are contoured over much larger distances and in terms of construction are more comparable to

the larger Marakwet and valley bottom furrows.

Valley bottom furrows are led off the major valley bottom rivers (Marin, Kale and Wei Wei) using large stone, mud, and brush dams. They are then led along the flat valley bottom, sometimes raised above the flood plain on small embankments and at times contoured around small erosion gullies. These furrows are generally wider than their hill counterparts, occasionally being up to a metre in diameter and longer with Paro furrow being some 5 km long. Valley furrows are often stone lined (Figure 3C), particularly close to the intake, where large stone embankments lead the furrow away from the river course. They also tend to flow through the territory of numerous clans and thus represent a wider variety of users and more complicated system of management.

While a number of furrows have been constructed within living memory - and can thus be dated absolutely - others are confined to the 'remote past', with informants often claiming that they were produced by the Mürkutwö age-set, dated to the late 19th century and the oldest age-set in memory. Clearly many of the furrows are older than this - particularly since we know they were in existence well before Beech wrote his account of the Pokot in 1911. The Pokot tend to telescope historical memory into

**Figure 4.** A-B: Turkwel type ceramics, Morpus rockshelter; C: rouletted ceramic, Wei wei valley; D: small modern Pokot cooking pot; E: chert crescent, Wei wei valley.



a single age-set cycle, making interpretation of oral history particularly difficult. However, drawing on current agricultural trends and accompanying settlement patterns, a broad chronology for the development of this irrigation system can be established. The oldest furrows, dated to at least 150 years ago, are situated on the lower slopes to the north of the valley. These are followed in age by the most northerly of the valley bottom furrows, notably Sangat, Ipet and Paro furrows, which remain among the largest and best built of all the Pokot furrows. To the south of the valley and on the higher slopes a number of furrows have been built in more recent years, includ-

ing a number within the last twenty years. These furrows represent the gradual movement of people southwards and up slope, a process encouraged by the introduction of maize in the late 1930s, and continuing up to the present.

This population movement southwards and up-slope into the hills is also supported by changes in the settlement pattern ascertained from eight transect surveys. Soil degradation and largescale erosion coincide with large numbers of abandoned homesteads along northerly transects. Along southerly transects the number of abandoned homesteads relative to modern ones is greatly reduced, suggesting that this

area was settled more recently. Furthermore, the distribution of abandoned furrows leading from seasonal streams is highly suggestive of a reduced hydrology in more northerly regions. Both reduced hydrology and increased erosion seem likely to be related to deforestation of the higher slopes - a process which has been encouraged by the introduction of maize (which is more tolerant of higher altitudes but does poorly on the stony, eroded lower slopes) and which becomes clear when one compares maps from the 1970s with the present tree line. Construction of stone terraces and small field clearance cairns, while uncommon, also tends to cluster to the north of the study area and is only found in areas where erosion has exposed sufficient stone to facilitate/necessitate their construction (Figures 3D-E). Terracing normally consists of contoured wattle fences and/or the piling of 'trash' organic matter from the clearance of the field along the contour. Through the process of down-hill hoeing these simple terraces gradually form more permanent, gently sloped, terraces, which can be found on slopes with gradients of forty degrees and more.

Abandoned homestead sites are easily located in this region due to the fact that the Pokot cut large flat platforms into the valley sides on which they build their homes. These platforms remain easily visible for a considerable time after the home has been abandoned. Moreover, limited erosion often ensures that hearth stones and kerb stones (placed around the bottoms of the walls) remain partially visible (Figure 3A). Excavation of three of these platforms has confirmed that compound and house layouts generally conform to those of the modern Marakwet (Moore 1986:99), despite a number of subtle changes among modern Pokot households. Ash deposits (waste from the hearth) are often encountered, and excavation at one site has demonstrated two distinct phases of deposition - likely relating to two phases of occupation. This seems to confirm Pokot assertions that house platforms are reused and encouragingly suggests that older phases of occupation may be encountered in the future. Currently, however, excavated finds, other than ceramics indistinguishable from those of the modern Pokot, have been scarce. Fortunately, a number of rouletted and other ceramic types have been recovered from scatters relating to homestead platforms and rock shelters. While some of the rouletted wares show close affinities to historically recorded Okiek, Sengwer and

Marakwet ceramics, affinities with Sirikwa ceramics are also clear (Figure 4C).

Based on both opportunistic and systematic transect surveys, the present study has located some sixteen rock shelters<sup>4</sup>. Of these sixteen, three display a clear antiquity of use, with surface finds including a variety of ceramics and LSA lithics, including exotic cherts and obsidian (Figure 4E). Some of the ceramic styles found at these sites are similar to those recovered from abandoned settlement areas and it seems likely that the intact deposits of these rock shelters may be used to develop a chronological sequence for the region.

Outside of the main study area, the rockshelter at Morpus (located by Robertshaw in 1979) was relocated and subjected to a more intensive surface survey. Erosion since Robertshaw's time appears to have exposed more of the site and a number of interesting discoveries were made. Erosion within the rock shelter has exposed one well defined Iron Age occupation horizon (in section) and a possible sequence of earlier occupations. Large quantities of well preserved bone were apparent alongside an abundance of rouletted ceramics and iron slag. Outside of the rockshelter the remains of a furnace were partially exposed with tuyères *in situ*. Of particular interest, surface scatters outside the shelter produced a worked lithic assemblage, again including non-local cherts and obsidian. Associated with this assemblage were numerous ceramic sherds of a highly distinctive type, showing affinities to the poorly understood Turkwel tradition recorded by Robbins (1980) (Figures 4A-B). If these sherds are a variation of the Turkwel tradition then they represent the most southerly distribution of this style and may be significant for understanding the prehistory of this poorly researched region.

## Summary

Previous archaeological research in the Cherangani Hills has been almost non-existent. However, the current study is attempting to remedy this situation. The bulk of this first season of research has focused on the more recent history of the intensive agricultural system found in the Tamkal valley. A second season of research in 2007 will aim to elaborate on this history in greater detail and will concentrate on dating the development of the system.

Further house platforms will be excavated alongside a series of rock shelters, which will hopefully provide a more reliable cultural sequence. Based on surface finds, this sequence should extend from the present back into the LSA. While the primary focus of this study remains the agricultural system, it is hoped that rock shelter data will be of broader use to all those interested in the more general prehistory of northern Kenya, including the spread of food production into the region some 3000-4000 years ago. Work undertaken so far in the Tamkal valley and at Mopus demonstrates the significant, but as yet barely tapped, archaeological potential of the Cherangani region.

### Footnotes

1. Blackburn (1974) records the Charangani (Cherangani) as a group of 'Okiek', Kalenjin-speaking, forest inhabiting foragers. However, their origins are uncertain. They are clearly closely related to the Pokot and Marakwet, with intermarriage common, and today most engage in a mixture of agriculture and gathering, with a particular focus on honey collecting. Whether this economy has a significant antiquity remains to be seen. While the Charangani in particular, and the Okiek in general, might be seen as an ancestral hunter-gatherer peoples, distinct from surrounding Kalenjin and Maa speakers, the close relationship between these peoples over recent years likely makes any simple account of Okiek origins difficult.
2. The Maasai term 'Suk' was originally used to refer to the Pokot (Beech 1911:1).
3. In treating systems such as this as ahistorical, developers likely miss the various ways in which systems expand and contract in response to various internal and external stimuli (i.e. climate change, soil degradation, conflict, political crises, changing market forces), hence the real practical benefit of detailed archaeological research (Widgren 2000; Davies 2006).
4. It seems likely that both of Robertshaw's previously reported rock shelters have been relocated and included in this figure.

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