

# 4,300-Year-old chimpanzee sites and the origins of percussive stone technology

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Archaeological research in the African rainforest reveals unexpected results in the search for the origins of hominoid technology. The ancient Panin sites from Côte d'Ivoire constitute the only evidence of prehistoric ape behavior known to date anywhere in the world. Recent archaeological work has yielded behaviorally modified stones, dated by chronometric means to 4,300 years of age, lodging starch residue suggestive of prehistoric dietary practices by ancient chimpanzees. The "Chimpanzee Stone Age" pre-dates the advent of settled farming villages in this part of the African rainforest and suggests that percussive material culture could have been inherited from a common human–chimpanzee clade, rather than invented by hominins, or have arisen by imitation, or resulted from independent technological convergence.

Tool use among modern wild ape populations, first reported in the early 19th century (1), has been documented throughout tropical Africa, and chimpanzees from West Africa are known for their use of stone tools for nut cracking (2–6). In 2002, the publication of recent buried remains of unintentionally fractured stone left behind by modern chimpanzees from Côte d'Ivoire outlined the potential of using archaeological methods in cultural primatological research and also identified the type of material assemblage that would allow archaeologists to detect and characterize ancient chimpanzee nut-cracking behavior. To test the feasibility and scope of the new methodology, we conducted further work in Tai National Park, and investigated the existence of ancient chimpanzee sites and whether these sites would offer an answer to the long-standing question of the antiquity of nut-cracking behavior (6, 7). The archaeological evidence retrieved consists of behaviorally modified stones, dated by chronometric means to 4,300 years of age, whose attached food residue suggests chimpanzee manipulation, rather than natural causes or human intervention. This discovery speaks of true prehistoric great ape behavior that pre-dates the onset of agriculture in this part of Africa (8). The chimpanzee assemblages are contemporaneous with the local Later Stone Age (8); thus, they represent a parallel "Chimpanzee Stone Age" that prompts us to ask whether percussive material culture could have been inherited from a common human–chimpanzee clade rather than invented by hominins (cf. 9, 10), have arisen by imitation, or resulted from independent technological convergence.

## The Archaeological Horizon: Age and Composition

The sites of Noulo, Sacoglotis B, and Panda 100 (Fig. 1) are located at 5°N/7°E, and 200 m above sea level; in the lowland rainforest of Tai National Park, Côte d'Ivoire, on the flood plain traversed by a small meandering black water stream called Audrenisrou; within the chimpanzee territory known as "North Group." Archaeological excavation took place over the course of two field seasons in 2001 and 2003, following standard paleolithic archaeology techniques. The research area is in a closed-canopy environment that receives ≈2,000 mm of annual precipitation (11). As part of the West African Craton, the region's geological configuration is dominated by igneous and metamorphic rocks of Precambrian origin (12). The archaeological sites studied here are located on a flat riverbank that

Table 1. List of radiometric ages by <sup>14</sup>C from the sites of Noulo, Panda 100, and Sacoglotis B

Provenance	Sample data	<sup>13</sup> C/ <sup>12</sup> C, per mil	Conventional radiocarbon age, years B.P.
Noulo			
Uppermost part of profile	Beta-196391	−27.3	230 ± 40
	Beta-195439	−27.2	270 ± 40
	Beta-196390	−26.4	410 ± 40
Main archaeological horizon	Beta-196953	−27.5	2,200 ± 40
	Beta-195444	−26.7	2,890 ± 40
	Beta-196392	−26.3	2,910 ± 40
	Beta-195441	−28.9	2,970 ± 40
	Beta-195440	−25.9	4,240 ± 120
Underneath archaeological horizon	Beta-195442	−28.1	6,290 ± 40
Panda 100	Beta-172916	−27.6	2,330 ± 40
	Beta-164876	−27.9	2,440 ± 40
	Beta-164877	−27.2	2,440 ± 40
	Beta-172913	−26.8	3,750 ± 40
	Beta-164879	−25	4,280 ± 40
Sacoglotis B	Beta-195443	−28.6	1,280 ± 40

gets regularly inundated. Sedimentation is thicker than 4 m, alternating silty sands, muddy sands, and sandy silts that include patches of pebbles and cobbles. Small fires affecting isolated trees and caused by lightning are common occurrences throughout the Guineo–Congolian rainforest (13); leaving behind a ubiquitous record of former vegetation and forest composition as well as a source of datable material. Numerous pits excavated throughout the Audrenisrou valley bottom document the effects of past forest fires that charred one or several trees, and at the sites of Noulo, Panda 100, and Sacoglotis B, a total of 15 <sup>14</sup>C assays performed on excavated charcoal samples (Table 1) indicate that (i) sedimentary deposition in this part of the landscape is older than 6,000 years, (ii) the archaeological assemblage studied in this paper dates back 4,300 years, and (iii) this assemblage is composed of relict materials deposited at different times over the course of >2,000 years.

We present stone assemblages from three sites east of the Audrenisrou, <200 m apart from each other (Fig. 1). Most of these

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**Table 2. Technological features of the stone assemblage excavated in the Taï National Park, Côte d'Ivoire**

ID	Site	Blind test		Fragments, <i>n</i>	Depth, cm	Technological by-product of thrusting percussion	Dimensions, mm		
		Starch	Stone				Length	Height	Width
1	Noulo			1	60	Chunk	70	60	35
2	Noulo			1	70	Edge/corner	85	120	20
3	Noulo			1	70	Edge/corner	65	65	22
4	Noulo			1	70	Edge/corner	80	25	15
5	Noulo	31–32	4	1	70	Chunk	110	60	50
6	Noulo			2	70	Edge/corner	50	40	30
7	Noulo	34–36	NT	1	78	Complete piece	130	40	40
8	Noulo			3	84	Chunk	90	90	30
9	Noulo			1	70	Chunk	150	150	60
10	Noulo			1	60	Flake	30	50	15
11	Noulo			1	62	Flake	30	45	10
12	Noulo			1	62	Flake	15	15	8
13	Noulo	30	11	1	76	Chunk	100	80	80
14	Noulo	33	8	1	63	Complete piece	100	70	70
15	Noulo			1	76	Chunk	100	50	40
16	Noulo			1	83	Flake	30	40	15
17	Noulo			1	80	Chunk	100	90	50
18	Noulo			1	90	Chunk	100	90	50
19	Noulo			1	70	Edge/corner	55	20	20
20	Noulo			1	83	Chunk	70	60	30
21	Noulo	37	32	1	68	Chunk	100	50	50
22	Noulo			1	83	Flake	70	90	10
23	Noulo	3–9	3	1	70	Chunk	220	80	55
24	Noulo	10–20	NT	1	80	Almost complete piece	70	60	60
25	Noulo			1	80	Edge/corner	100	80	30
26	Noulo			1	74	Chunk	100	80	60
27	Noulo	38	6	1	29	Edge/corner	70	70	60
28	Noulo	28–29	NT	1	50	Chunk	140	70	70
29	Sacoglotis B	1–2	14	1	15	Complete piece	190	80	80
30	Panda 100			1	121	Edge/corner	80	90	45
31	Panda 100			1	125	Chunk	110	60	60
32	Panda 100	21–27	NT	1	110	Edge/corner	70	70	25
33	Noulo			1	57	Edge/corner	50	20	35

stones, however, come from one site alone: Noulo (three specimens came from Panda 100; and one from the site of Sacoglotis B). At Noulo, we excavated a 10-m grid down to 1 m of depth, and unearthed a stone-rich horizon at 60–90 cm (three specimens were found at 29–57 cm). This horizon produced 23,168 g of modified stone (206 pieces) (Table 2). Its physical condition is fresh, except for some instances of chemical weathering in the form of surface desquamation. Stones from all size categories and diverse raw materials were excavated with shatter <20 mm excluded (mean length: 68 mm; range: 25–220 mm). Granitoid rocks represent 62%; quartz and quartzite represent 36%; laterite represents 1%, and feldspar represents 1%. The horizontal scattering of this collection clusters around three areas rich in granitoid shatter, with two smaller outliers to the north and south of these higher density spots (Fig. 1). About half of the quartz–quartzite assemblages concentrated in the southwest corner of the grid. The granitoid pieces broke off rocks that, generally, are not susceptible to percussive fracture (nonconchoidal, 88%; 20,370 g); a smaller portion of the assemblage (12%; 2,799 g) was from quartz and quartzite; rocks whose fracture results in a curved, rippled breakage surface (conchoidal). Average concentration of nonconchoidal pieces is 1.2 per m<sup>2</sup>; mean concentration for conchoidal pieces is ≈0.7 per m<sup>2</sup>.

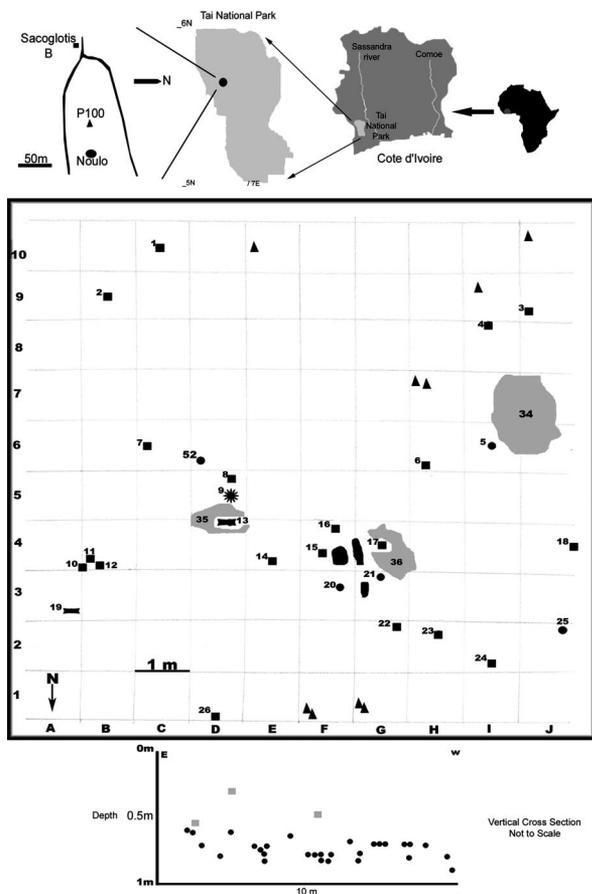
Can the archaeological evidence from the Taï forest be attributed to natural or behavioral agency? If behavioral, can we discriminate between stone modifications such as those produced by nut-cracking versus those derived from systematic flaking? What is the direct evidence for nut-cracking, and especially, do these stone assemblages represent mid-Holocene human or chimpanzee agency?

**Fluvial Geofact versus Behavioral Accumulation**

Fine sands, silt, and clay are indicative of very low energy fluvial regimes such as floods and standing pools associated with

braided and meandering streams. Grain size from the excavated matrix corresponds with the “Ingram–Wentworth” sedimentological profile known as “muddy sands” (14) and indicates that pebble-, cobble-, and boulder-sized rock fragments would be naturally lacking. This prediction is corroborated by the results from excavation in 26 off-site ground-truthing pits (area: 0.5–6.25 m<sup>2</sup> taken to a maximum depth of 2 m) along a 220-m transect around the site of Noulo, in which cobble-sized stones were found in 5 pits only; the remaining 21 pits yielded ceramics, lithics, iron, or nothing. To test the proposition that the accumulation of stones reported here took place by means other than fluvial agency, a triple blind test was carried out. The lead author (J.M.) and two independent observers (J.H. and S.K.) classified stone specimens randomly numbered by J.M. as coming from (i) nonartifactual objects shaped exclusively by geological forces, (ii) objects produced by systematic flaking, or (iii) objects generated by cracking (thrusting percussion). The test collection comprised 90 rock specimens, of which 60 were not from the Taï forest. To the extent of our possibilities, we included raw materials that are likely to be found in a granitic domain, such as granites, diorites, quartzite, and quartz, but limited access to geofact collections led us to include other rocks as well. Of these, 30 came from a high-energy, undisturbed glacial till in the Canadian Rockies, near Banff, Alberta, where silicified limestone pebbles and cobbles show several kinds of natural modification that gives them the appearance of artifacts (15). The other 30 came from a demonstrated behavioral site dated to the mid-Holocene (site FiPo-147; Royal Alberta Museum) that yielded hundreds of artifacts including lithic debitage in quartz and quartzite, among other raw materials (16). The remainder of 30 specimens came from the Ivorian sites of Noulo (*n* = 28), Panda 100 (*n* = 1), and Sacoglotis B (*n* = 1), and these were previously selected by J.M.

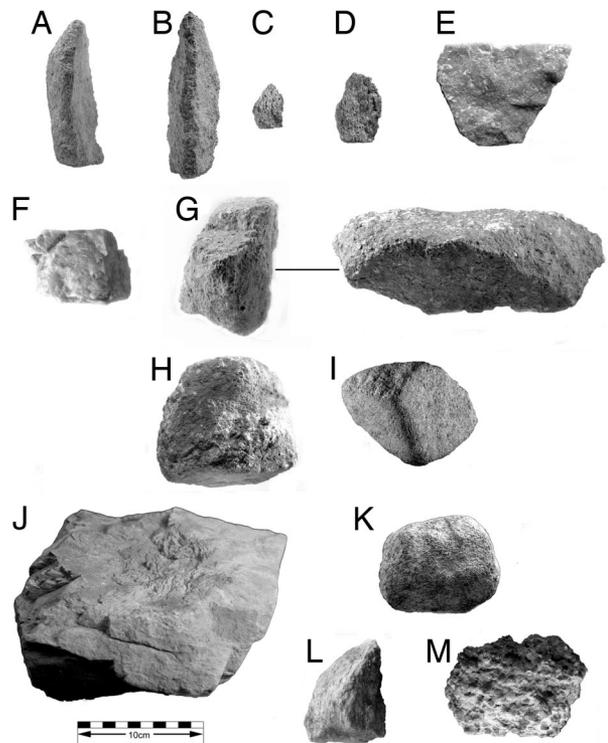




**Fig. 1.** Map of Noulo. Excavation grid covers 100 m<sup>2</sup>. Solid black squares indicate granitoid specimens. Circles represent quartz specimens. Asterisks indicate feldspar-rich granitoids, and diamonds indicate laterite pieces. Each spot represents one piece, but in the case of shatter or refitted specimens, the number of specimens per spot is as follows: no. 6, 2; no. 8, 3; no. 34, 59; no. 35, 29. Light gray shading indicates granitoid shatter. Triangles and dark gray shading indicate quartz shatter, representing specimens reduced by humans shown on Table 2 as nos. 35, 29; 38, 27; and 45, 26.

and total mass of stone products can help elucidate the agency that generated them. A review of hammer metrics from early sites (9, 10, 25) indicates that the hominin hand accommodates hammerstone up to 12 cm in maximum length, often <8 cm. Hominin hammers typically weigh <400 g, and even anvils, the largest component of this bimodal technology, on average, reach a maximum weight of 1,000 g, but often weigh much less. We know that hominins do intentionally select tabular rocks and raw materials such as quartz and quartzite for their hammers and anvils at sites such as Olduvai (Bed 1) (10). In contrast, a 1-year study of nut-cracking sites ( $n = 1434$ ) and hammers ( $n = 133$ ) among modern chimpanzees (26) indicates both a strong preference for granitoid rocks, and large/heavy hammers (65% weigh 1,000–9,000 g; 23% weigh <1,000 g; 12% weigh >9,000 g; the limit is 24,000 g). This marked difference probably is related to the larger size of the chimpanzee hand, its morphology, and the overall arm strength, which are several times superior to that of any hominin species known to have used hammers and anvils.

To classify the products of thrusting percussion, we modified published work on the different modalities of products generated by bashing technologies (10) and distinguished complete pieces, “chunks” (significant portion of the hammer/anvil has been preserved), “edges/corners,” flakes, and shatter (Fig. 2). Our blind test reveals that independent observers agree on the classification of thrusting percussion by-products in 70% of the cases ( $\kappa$  values



**Fig. 2.** Selected thrusting percussion products. Stone specimen ID, as it appears on Table 2: A, 2; B, 4; C, 11; D, 12; E, 25; F, 20; G (two pieces), 23; H, 17; I, 28; J, 29; K, 14; L, 27; M, 13. (Photograph by Gerald Newlands, Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary.)

between 0.508 and 0.565;  $n = 20$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), which shows that stone pieces unintentionally generated by thrusting percussion and stone pieces intentionally produced by systematic flaking can be differentiated. The majority of the stones excavated at Noulo are the unintentional by-products of bashing technologies. To discriminate human from chimpanzee agency, we used reconstructions of original size and mass of the stone fragments before breakage. These estimates were subject to blind testing as well, and our results indicate a high level of confidence in the maximum projected length and mass by three independent observers (65%, 75%, and 90%;  $\kappa$  values of 0.493, 0.636, and 0.851, respectively;  $n = 20$ ;  $P < 0.000$ ). The mean maximum length of stone by-products derived from thrusting percussion is 97 mm (range, 35–220 mm), and the average mass is 710 g (range, 21–3,761 g). Flakes generated by thrusting percussion average 33.5 mm. Therefore, our reconstructed totals for thrusting percussion products suggest a projected maximum length of  $\approx 320$  mm (range, 70–660 mm), and maximum mass or  $\approx 2,030$  g (range, 145–6,750 g), well above what is known for by-products of hominin thrusting percussion.

### Starch Residues as Direct Evidence for Nut-Cracking

Can we demonstrate that such stones were used by chimpanzees? Present-day chimpanzees crack five nut species that, except for one (*Coula edulis*), are not cracked by local human populations (26). If part of the stone assemblage retrieved at Noulo was used to crack starch-bearing nuts open, those pieces might shelter ancient starch residue still lodged in the stone crevices. If so, this may represent direct evidence for both ancient plant usage and stone function. To test this proposition, our research design followed field and laboratory protocols used by numerous researchers in the study of ancient starch grains throughout the world (see *Materials and Methods*) (27–33). Once all examiners achieved a reasonable familiarity with the reference collection, we asked two examiners (H.B. and R.T.) to inspect 40 starch granules (10.8% of the total



tions of this line of work require a reevaluation of the terms under which we can make meaningful comparisons of Oldowan and Chimpanzee cultures. The behavioral variables documented at Noulo indicate that chimpanzees and hominins share cultural attributes (39–41), including the transport of stones across the landscape for a projected use elsewhere; the optimal combination of raw material, size, and weight criteria to perform a predicted activity; the re-occupation of focal points (the accumulation and concentration of both stone and botanical debris is artificially created by behavior); creation of activity areas; the use of locally available resources; and the curation and selection of specific types of stones that are most optimal for specific technological activities.

The systematic archaeological study of prehistoric chimpanzee cultures suggests that the “Chimpanzee Stone Age” started at least 4,300 years ago, that nut-cracking behavior in the Tai forest has been transmitted over the course of >200 generations, and that chimpanzee material culture has a long prehistory whose deep roots are only beginning to be uncovered. These findings substantiate the contribution of rainforest archaeology to human evolutionary studies in areas other than the classical savanna-woodlands of East and Southern Africa and add support to fossil discoveries from these other regions indicative of an ancient chimpanzee past (42).

### Materials and Methods

For ancient starch analysis, we processed a large collection of residue extracted from 31 behaviorally modified stone pieces from a pool of 38 specimens, 7 of which have been positively identified by all examiners as derived from thrusting percussion. Second, we used multiple lines of control samples (30–32) to test whether the tools were the primary source of starch grains, rather than random contamination. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that some of the starch discovered on the stones comes from redeposition unrelated to use (e.g., background starch derived from roots coming in contact with the stone over hundreds of years), the differential preservation of starch granules on the stone specimens compared with that in their surrounding free-standing matrix indicates that a large part of the assemblage is genuine prehistoric residue (30–32). Third, for all examiners to propose potential identification for the grains, we worked with a reference collection that included not just the five nut species known to be cracked by chimpanzees, but also two other types of starch-producing plants typically used by human foragers in the African rainforest. Thus, we included all nut and tuber species relevant to modern hominoid starch use plus other species present in our study area totaling 18 nut species, 1 palm pith, and 8 rainforest yams. The specimens used for the test were made available to the examiners on 13 separate

microscope slides, and these represented 37% of the total residue ( $n = 370$  grains) obtained from the sites of Noulo (11 stones providing 37 grains), Panda 100 (1 stone providing 1 starch grain), and Sacoglotis B (1 stone providing 2 grains). Extraction protocols for both sediment and residue samples follow the methodology of Zarrillo and Kooyma (33) with minor modifications. Quantity of sediments used ranged from 0.5 g (residue samples extracted from stones through sonication) to 1 g (free-standing sediments). Column samples ( $n = 5$ ) were taken at 10-cm intervals from the North wall at the site of Noulo. Modern deposits formed around decomposing, natural piles of nuts ( $n = 4$ ) from *Detarium senegalense*, *Sacoglotis gabonensis*, *Panda oleosa*, and *Coula edulis/Parinari excelsa* were scraped off to a maximum depth of 2.5 cm. Modern chimpanzee hammers ( $n = 3$ ) came from the uppermost levels of two sites, Loukoum and Panda 100, and were all excavated to a maximum depth of 5 cm. Natural stones on-site ( $n = 2$ ), off-site ( $n = 1$ ), Later Stone Age lithics (radial cores) ( $n = 3$ ), stone sharpener fashioned by humans ( $n = 1$ ), and matrix samples retrieved around archaeological specimens, but not in contact with them ( $n = 4$ ), provided the rest of our control samples. The amount of starch granules found in these control samples varies, and the types found are similar to those seen in the archaeological specimens. Values below represent an average for a given type of control. For example, four sediment samples collected around stone specimens yielded no grains. Five free-standing, on-site column samples yielded an average of 0.4 grains. Four naturally occurring nut piles yielded a mean  $\approx 0.5$  grains. Three unmodified on- and offsite stones yielded no grains, whereas four Later Stone Age stone tools yielded a mean of 0.2 grains. In contrast, residue extracted from 31 archaeological stone produced by thrusting percussion contains a mean of 12 grains per stone (3 of the 31 stones yielded no grains; 28 stones yielded 1–90 grains).

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