In 2001-2002, the Mandara Archaeological Project’s survey in the Mandara mountains established the presence of fifteen ruins, known as Diy-Gi’d-Biy, literally “eye-head-chief,” to the Mafa people who live around them, and to us as DGB sites. Radiocarbon dates indicate that they were built, used, and abandoned in a short period centered on the first half of the 15th century AD. While varying greatly in size, they constitute the most impressive set of indigenous stone-built structures in sub-Saharan Africa outside the Horn and the complex of ruins in Zimbabwe and Mozambique that reaches its apogee in Great Zimbabwe. This is surprising as the construction of such sites is usually orchestrated by powerful political leaders, and this is a region long characterized by egalitarian societies and petty chiefs. Our excavations at two sites revealed complex construction sequences and architectural features including passages, underground chambers, staircases, and problematic ‘silos.’

In our work on DGB sites, we are theoretically concerned with the recognition and interpretation of social agency in the archaeological record. The DGB monuments are as steeped in human intentions and agency as is Chartres Cathedral or the Lincoln Memorial, but to say more requires that we first determine their uses.

FUNCTIONS PROPOSED

Christian Seignobos, who in 1982 brought the two largest monuments to scientific notice in the *Revue Géographique du Cameroun*, described them as “oppida” and as “acropolises,” suggesting that they served as “points where power crystallized . . . probably serving to support the residences of chiefs within . . . nucleated settlements” (my translation). Others have employed terms such as “fortress,” “stronghold,” and “donjon fort” that imply defensive functions.

Before we began fieldwork, Gerhard Müller-Kosack and I compared what little we knew of the sites with the architecture of more recent Mandara montagnards (mountain peoples). We concluded that the ruins might be the surviving remnants of larger domestic compounds, and as such represent an exaggerated architectural expression of the widespread association of height, seniority, and the male gender. The platforms, we thought, were most likely linked to important males, perhaps of a chiefly kin group, able to mobilize a considerable labor force.

Our subsequent discovery that the sites principally comprised a number of abutting, successively built, rubble-filled but carefully faced platforms led us to propose that they might represent groups of mausolea relating to a society more complex than that of the historic Mafa. We also learned that they are clustered in a 22 km² area.

The northeastern aspect of DGB-1 at Kuva, showing the partially blocked passage entrance and, behind the large fig tree, a platform some 6 m high, the tallest at any site.
on what had once been the frontier between the pre-colonial Wandala state and the montagnards on and with whom they preyed and traded. This suggested the further possibility that the builders of the sites might have acted as middlemen between the peoples of the plains and mountains.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST PREVIOUSLY SUGGESTED FUNCTIONS

By February 2002 we had located eleven DGB sites. During our fall season we located four more sites, bringing the total to fifteen, and we conducted two excavations. The new data allow us to reject several earlier interpretations and to suggest others. Consider that:

- Despite their positioning on ridge tops, DGB sites, ranging in area from about 75 m² to over 2000 m², are indefensible. They lack direct access to water, and most can be reached with little difficulty by cavalry.
- DGB sites generally lack household structures, facilities, and equipment. There is a near absence of middens and domestic waste other than a selection of pottery, a few iron artifacts, and a little bone. Non-utilitarian features such as passages that lead through platforms but not necessarily to anything, and chambers and silos that could have held neither water nor grain also argue against domestic function.
- Unless the silos were, like fake Pharaonic tombs, constructed to deceive, an absence of human remains, tombs, or graves refutes the view that platforms were periodically constructed to house a succession of chiefly dead.
- The most distant sites are under 6 km apart, far too close to represent chieftoms. Although towering walls speak to us of power, preliminary work by Andrea Richardson on the energetics of construction indicates that the building of platforms and associated features did not require the recruitment of large labor forces. She estimates that even

![Map of DGB sites in northern Cameroon and distribution around the Shikewe watershed.](image)
The complex entrances into and onto the DGB-2 NE Platform. Passages 1 and 2 go into, but not through, the platform. Passage 1 was divided into two chambers, and its entrance is blocked with the wall seen in the image. Passage 2 goes deep into the platform. Its outer portion was largely destroyed and its entrance narrowed during the construction of a staircase (3) up the outside of the platform. In the process, the outer part of passage 2 was filled with earth, sherds, and bone, and one of its former lintels (L) was broken in the course of its reuse for staircase construction. The inner portion of this passage is too dangerous to investigate without special knowledge and equipment.

Features of DGB sites: (a) the passage through DGB-8; the staircase seen in (b) rises from the left side of the passage up the south side of the North platform; (c) at DGB-2, workers prepare to lift one of a series of lintels to gain access to the second chamber; (d) Andrea Richardson studies the north entrance to the southeast passage at DGB-2; this was built in two main episodes and once had a lintel roof.
the tallest platform could have been completed by a group of ten workers in the course of a single dry season, without special equipment but requiring the direction of a master mason to achieve the smooth, dry stone, semi-coursed, façades diagnostic of DGB structures.

The only ancient exotic find from either excavation was a tiny cuprous bead of the 13th-17th centuries AD. While constituting a distinct cultural expression, DGB iron and ceramic artifacts are clearly attributable to the broad Iron Age tradition that has been developing in this region since the first millennium BC. Thus, we can reject the idea that the sites were *entrepôts* or otherwise mediated between plains states and montagnard communities.

**NEW PROPOSALS**

The indigenous nature of the DGB culture justifies an attempt to infer site functions by integrating the archaeological data with our knowledge of the regional themes described by Judy Sterner in her book, *The Ways of the Mandara Mountains*. The evidence of the architecture, ceramics, and the simple hierarchy of site sizes indicates that all fifteen sites date to the same period.

From any one site many others can be seen; all but two are located on high points on or near the margins of the Shikewe watershed and of another small valley. The two outliers are perched high on shoulders of the Oupay massif, at 1449 m the tallest in the Mandara range. Overlapping viewscapes allow for surveillance of the area of site distribution and its surrounds, extending east into the plain of Koza, north to the limits of the Mandara mountains, west and southwest into Nigeria, and south into the mountains. I doubt, however, that surveillance was primarily directed against internal or external enemies; the visibility of sites from each other also facilitates coordination of community activities. So what might these have been?

In pre-colonial times there were few authorities in this impoverished region capable of mobilizing even small workforces to undertake the construction of non-utilitarian structures. However, a potent motivation was and remains anxiety over rain. During the May-October season, rain falls irregularly and unpredictably in both the short and the long terms, putting livelihoods at risk. Control over rain constitutes a source of power sought after and manipulated by chiefs and “masters of the rain.” It is hardly coincidental that a most powerful rainmaker, the *bi yam* of Mudukwa, lives within the area of the DGB sites, which his ancestors found abandoned on their arrival generations ago from Muktele territory some 25 km to the east.

The sites themselves contain several allusions to water. At DGB-8, an outcrop at the base of a silo was covered with a pile of sand and gravel that had been lugged up a steep hillside from a streambed below. Higher up in the silo was a rock with cup-shaped depressions of a type often associated with streams and wells. At DGB-2 river pebbles, again fetched from some distance, had been incorporated into a floor laid between the southeast and northeast platforms over an area that was once the main entrance to the monument. River pebbles were also found in two other locations.

DGB-12 also proffers suggestive evidence: like several other sites, it is approached by a monumental stairway. The rainmaker makes special use of these stairways as he moves about his territory, referring to them as the “ways of God.” Just below the site is a fissure in the bedrock that has been roofed by massive granite lintels; in late November it still held water. Such features may have inspired the passages that characterize DGB sites, and for which it is often hard to find a practical explanation. It is also conceivable that S-shaped passage layouts represented water courses, and that staircases evoked the waterfalls that tumble down the mountains after heavy downpours.

Our intuition, that the sites were periodically renewed community rain shrines of which the most important was DGB-1 at Kuva, will be put to the test as we continue to study an archaeological record clearly produced by people who did not mechanically reproduce their culture but, like ourselves, were actors endowed with intentionality. Imagine, for a moment, the DGB sites in the bucketing rains of July and August with sheets of water running over platforms, cascading down stairways and into passages, gushing out as reddish torrents. In this sense the sites may have performed as symbolic water towers and perhaps have hosted performances in which players used covered passages and stairs to dramatize entrances onto platform-top stages set with stone and daub scenery of which only traces remain. The ceramics, with an abundance of funnel-mouth beer jugs and large bowls with horn-like handles, and some rarer forms, hint at feasts attended by an audience that included, again on ceramic
DGB-2 ceramics: (a) two funnel mouth jars in situ in the first chamber of passage 1 in the NE platform; (b) the smaller of the two vessels in (a); (c) exterior (above) and top view of a handle from the edge of a large bowl; (d) a blackened “goblet” from the fill of passage 2; (e) from the same fill, a blackened tripod cooking pot. All may have been used in feasts. Twisted strip rouletting decorates items a-c. The surviving height of item e is 24 cm, and b, c, and d are drawn at approximately the same scale.

In conclusion, while our sites are not directly linked to the Kanem-Borno state and contemporary political developments occurring around and south of Lake Chad, it is likely that some part of the stimulus leading to their construction was a broader, though as yet inadequately documented, areal trend towards complex societies and an integration of economies. Environmental factors are probably also implicated. After centuries of relative stability, the end of the 14th and first half of the 15th centuries AD constitute a period of drought during which the level of Lake Chad fell rapidly, its southern basin drying out completely around AD 1450 before an equally quick recovery in the next decades. Thus the rise and fall of our symbolic water towers may be associated with changes in both political economy and precipitation in the Mandara mountains and beyond.

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For Further Reading


Acknowledgments

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