

Introduction

Through the courtesy of Dr. Alan Jacobs of the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, I was informed of the presence of some unusual pottery in Kisii District, Kenya. Consequently, in May 1971, I conducted an archaeological reconnaissance of the district with the hope of collecting a sample of the ware large enough for comprehensive description, and obtaining some information about the chronological position of the pottery and its relationships, if any, to existing ethnic entities. The field work lasted about four weeks, during which the district's rather dense network of roads, with attendant cuts, was systematically inspected, a small cave (which proved essentially culturally sterile) was excavated, and various localities figuring in local traditions - smelting sites, etc. - were examined. Not only were my hopes concerning the above-mentioned pottery fulfilled, but I also recovered samples of at least one - possibly two or three - additional previously undescribed ceramic traditions. I was assisted by Mr. Mohammed Salehe and Mr. Ali Ramadhani of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Mr. George Mituga Omari of Tabaka, Kisii District, and (when she was free of camp and baby-sitting responsibilities) my wife, Jan. Mr. Elikano Ong'lesha of Kisii Secondary School, was also very helpful in locating sites and suggesting likely areas for prospecting. I am also grateful to the District Commissioner of Kisii District, whose help and cooperation greatly facilitated the survey. The work was authorised by the Kenya Ministry of Natural Resources, Permit Form B/I, Ref. MNR 16/Vol.2/77, dated 14th May 1971.

The Land and the People

Topographically, Kisii District can be divided into two parts. The eastern two-thirds (approximately) consists of a heavily dissected, rather youthful-looking upland, ranging in elevation from about 1950 m to 2300 m. The heads of many of the valleys in the area, which is drained by the Gucha River and its tributaries, are choked, and this has resulted in the formation of numerous long, narrow expanses of flat, swampy bottomland. The soil in these swampy basins is iron-rich (water standing on the soil frequently has a ferric-stained surface), and both oral traditions and archaeological remains suggest that smelting sites were often established around the periphery of such basins. The area is bounded on the west by Manga Ridge, an escarpment formed by Pre-Cambrian quartzite, constituting by far the most prominent topographic feature of the district. The escarpment runs north-northeast from Kisii town to Bonyunyu, where it bends sharply east. A more or less broken southern extension of the ridge continues from Kisii to the southwestern corner of the district and beyond. On and just inside the eastern boundary of the district runs another broken ridge from a point south of Keroka to just west of Ikonge, where it meets the eastern extension of Manga Ridge.

West of Manga Ridge and north of its eastern limit lies the western third of the district characterized by lower elevations (ca. 1550 m to 1900 m) and more gentle relief. This portion of the district slopes gradually toward undulating lowlands along the eastern shore of Lake Victoria. Three major streams, all emptying into Lake Victoria, account for most of the drainage in the area: the Gucha, Riana and Mogusi rivers.

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All the district is well watered, being drained by rather large permanent streams and having precipitation ranging from about 150 cm to 200 cm per annum without marked seasonality though there is a rainfall peak during April and a smaller one in December. Since the district is intensively cultivated, it is difficult to determine what its natural vegetation might have been. However, judging from the heavy precipitation and fertile soils of the district, one infers that fairly dense forest might have covered the land prior to human interference. This inference is supported by the character of the only patch of natural vegetation left in the district - the Nyangweta Forest in the southwestern corner of Kisii District.

The intensity of cultivation is particularly high in the eastern portion of the district. Crops include not only staple foods in the local diet, such as maize and millet, but also a high percentage of cash crops, such as coffee and pyrethrum. The latter are, of course, a recent addition to the agricultural repertoire of the local people.

Kisii District is the homeland of the Gusii tribe - a Bantu-speaking group in a sea of non-Bantu peoples (Paranilotic Kipsigis and Maasai to the east and southeast and Nilotic Luo to the north, west, and southwest). Their closest linguistic ties are said to be with the Logooli (Maragoli) to the north, the Tende to the south, and the Kikuyu far to the east (Ogot 1967, 203). Historians differ as to the date of the Gusii's arrival in their present homeland, some placing it around the beginning of the sixteenth century A.D., while others place it around the middle of the eighteenth century; on balance, the latter date seems more likely to be correct (op. cit., 203-211 and 28). Concerning the location from which the Gusii migrated to their present homeland, there seems to be a consensus with respect to Mt. Elgon (loc. cit.).

Gusii society is said to be strongly patrilineal, the lineage principle playing an important role in political organization; the society is divided (traditionally) into small local units ("risagas") composed of a few homesteads, whose members share in cooperative labor and festivities (Mayer, 1953).

### The Sites

The Kisii reconnaissance revealed forty sites having archaeological materials in stratigraphic context; the sites are listed in alpha-numerical order in Table 1. The following site numbers have been vacated because the material from the sites proved essentially uninformative, or sites were combined, etc.: GsJd2, 5, 7, 8, 17, 23, 26-28; GsJc1; GtJc6. In addition to finds in stratigraphic context, isolated surface finds were collected at two locations: (1) a rim sherd of KSW type (see below) at a site designated GsJd0 (map reference 122 269) and (2) a large (140 x 74 mm) nosed scraper on an endstruck, quartzite flake at a site also designated GsJd0 (map reference 038 306). Nearly all of the sites were spotted in road cuts and, although fairly extensive probing was sometimes required to recover a suitable sample of debris from the sites, in only two cases (GsJd11 and GtJd5) were artifacts collected on privately owned land. Site GsJd11 is situated in a shamba belonging to Francis Nyoka, but the identity of the individual on whose land site GtJd5 occurs could not be determined.

It seems likely that in addition to being in stratigraphic context, most of the richer sites listed in Table 1 (e.g. GsJd6, 21 and 25 and GtJc1, 7 and 9) are in primary or only slightly displaced, archaeological context. Indeed, at GsJd21 there is little doubt that the artifacts were resting on or just above a house floor, in and around a hearth.

### Ceramic Traditions

Included among the finds from the Kisii reconnaissance expedition were numerous sherds representing two mutually exclusive ceramic traditions, both previously undescribed, and, in fewer numbers, sherds representing various other wares that bear no clear relationship to known pottery types. The two wares that are sufficiently well represented in the collection to merit being considered for type designation have been provisionally labelled Kisii Soft Ware (KSW) and Button-Necked Pottery (BNP); the remaining sherds have been lumped for discussion under the heading "Miscellaneous Pottery".

#### Kisii Soft Ware

This tradition is widely represented in Kisii District (see Table 1), although the eastern portion of the district is less well represented than the western in the present collection. The pottery is remarkably crude, being thick-walled (range is 15 to 19 mm) and poorly fired (i.e. soft); having a very poorly finished exterior surface, and rarely exhibiting body decoration. The paste is usually a fine clay, and it is often moderately to heavily tempered with large grits, most commonly of quartz and/or crushed rock, though ferricrete is a fairly common tempering ingredient, and charcoal is occasionally used. The ware often exhibits yellow or reddish to dark brown surface colors and a grey section. Coil fractures are abundantly represented.

Decoration is generally confined to the rim of the vessel; indeed, elaboration of rim treatment is one of the most striking features of the KSW pottery. A wide range of rim decoration and configuration is represented: thickened rims of various shapes, flanged rims, various kinds of impression (e.g. finger impressions) on the lip, horizontal appliqué strips below the lip, incised or rouletted decoration of the lip, etc. In contrast, body decoration is present on only three sherds; it consists of a simple geometric motif executed by means of crude, V-grooved incisions.

Information concerning KSW vessel shapes is sparse, and one has the impression that there is far less variation in this attribute than in rim treatment. The vessels tend to have large mouths, with diameters up to 38 cm and usually far exceeding 20 cm, and walls that are somewhat slab sided. Bases are round, though some specimens approach flatness. Open bowls and slightly necked pots appear to be common vessel types in the KSW pottery.

Associations between KSW pottery and other material remains are, unfortunately, rather ambiguous. There is evidence of iron-making at two KSW sites (GsJd11 and GsJd14; see Table 1), but the sites also contain pottery that differs markedly from KSW. However, there are two lines of circumstantial evidence which lend support to the idea that the

makers of KSW pottery had iron technology. One of these is that the town of Nyambaria, which lies on the edge of a swampy basin with iron-rich soil and which several informants identified as a traditional Gusii smelting site, lies close to an area where KSW sites are concentrated - where, in fact, the richest of the KSW sites (GsJd21) occurs. Another circumstantial connection between KSW ware and iron technology lies in the fact that a link, based on admittedly tenuous oral information, exists between KSW pottery and the Gusii people, who certainly had iron technology in pre-European times. For the present, it seems safe to say that it is more likely that KSW pottery represents an Iron Age society than a Stone Age one.

I hasten to add that stone artifacts are associated with KSW sherds at several sites (see Table 1). However, the quantities are very slight, which is what one would expect in the remains of a society that relies basically on iron technology for its cutting, scraping, and digging tools.

Because of deep weathering in Kisii District, bone preservation is poor; consequently, bone at the KSW sites (and, indeed, all the sites recorded here) was not only scarce but also highly friable. Fragmentary faunal remains were recovered at a number of KSW sites, but they were inadequate for identification below the level of the family. In most cases, Bovidae were represented and while domestic cattle may be involved, clear evidence of this is lacking.

Regarding possible connections between the KSW pottery and extant social groups, I was informed by Mr. Moriasi Achando (ca. 90 years old), of Nyambaria, that he had seen similar ware during his boyhood, but that it was not being made at that time. According to Mr. Achando, the KSW pottery was made in the time of his great grandfather - i.e. perhaps about 150 years ago. However, it was not possible to cross-check this information. If there is a connection between the KSW pottery and the Gusii, it reflects a marked discontinuity in the ceramic traditions of the society, for the modern Gusii pottery is well finished, well fired, and bears plaited-cord rouletted decoration - in fact, it appears to be patterned on the pottery of the Luo, one of the traditional enemies of the Gusii.

Most of the KSW sites seemed very small, so far as it was possible to determine their extent through exposed cultural debris. They do not, therefore, merit detailed comment. However, there is one site, GsJd21, which deserves a few words of description, not only because of its strategic location near a traditional smelting site and its richness but also because of the settlement information it provides. Like nearly all of the sites recorded in Table 2, this site was exposed by a road cut. Upon probing the cut to recover a sample of pottery, a house floor was encountered at a depth of approximately 80 cm from the modern surface. Sherds were lying on and above the floor, which also contained a group of hearth stones, within whose limits there lay a concentration of pottery and charcoal. Additional evidence of house construction was found at a neighbouring site (GsJd24), where one of the chunks of burnt clay forming the house floor exhibited the mould of a sapling - presumably a structural member of the house. It is possible that GsJd21, 22 and 24, all of which lie within a radius of 100 m., represent a continuous settlement rather than isolated sites.

I have been unable to find any connections between the KSW pottery and other wares of East Africa. Resemblances may be seen in the paste of Archdeacon Owen's Weroya collection (National Museum, Nairobi), but the Weroya pottery exhibits complex body decoration and none of the rim elaboration that is so characteristic of KSW pottery. It may be necessary to look further afield for related wares.

### Button-Necked Pottery

This tradition is not nearly as densely represented in Kisii District as the KSW tradition. Nevertheless, a substantial sample of BNP ware was collected - particularly at site GtJc7, where a total of 302 sherds was recovered, including the 23 decorated and/or rim sherds listed in Table 1. The BNP sites are distributed west of Manga Ridge and along its southern extension; no BNP sites are known from the uplands east of Manga Ridge, or along the ridge itself, where numerous KSW sites are located.

The BNP ware has well finished exterior surfaces, is well fired (hard), and has walls of moderate thickness (range is 7 to 12 mm). The paste varies from fine to sandy and is tempered mainly with quartz, occasionally with ferricrete. The surface color is usually yellow, yellow-brown, reddish-brown, or dark brown; and the sections are often grey. Coil fractures are evident in many of the BNP sherds.

The most distinctive attribute of the BNP ware is its decoration, which, in the present sample, is strictly confined to the neck of the pot. The decoration consists of a row of appliqué clay buttons, which vary greatly in size and regularity of form and spacing, but are nearly always aligned in a roughly horizontal row around the neck of the pot. There is only one exception to this orientation for the buttons - a neck sherd which has traces of a column of three vertically aligned buttons.

The only vessel forms represented in the sample are necked pots and (very sparsely) open bowls. Bodies and bases are round; mouths are of moderate size, ranging in diameter from 15 to 28 cm, and generally quite symmetrical.

Iron slag is unambiguously associated with BNP ware at site GtJc2 - a burial site that will presently be discussed in greater detail. Only one chipped stone artifact was found in direct association with BNP ware, which lends support to the view that the pottery represents an Iron Age society.

Save for the human remains found at GtJc2, no animal bone was recovered at any of the BNP sites.

Although all of the BNP occurrences seem to be small sites, two of them deserve special comment: the burial site, and a very rich hearth(?), GtJc7. At the former, some fragmentary human remains, stones, pot sherds, and iron slag were exposed by a road cut at a depth of ca. 75 - 100 cm from the modern surface. Most of the burial had been removed in road construction, and all that remained was a small portion of the skull cap and two metatarsals, all in extremely friable condition. The burial lay at a depth of 100 cm, and there was pottery and a small amount of charcoal in direct association with it. Immediately overlying the burial were four stones.

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with an average maximum diameter of about 20 cm, and a few pieces of iron slag. Additional pottery was recovered above the stones up to a depth of about 75 cm from the surface; higher in the profile, the soil was sterile. One small chert scraper was recovered either at the level of the burial stones or just above them, with the pottery. Although only one decorated sherd was recovered, eleven undecorated sherds indistinguishable from the decorated ware were present, and it is safe to say that all the pottery at GtJc2 is of BNP type.

The burial was that of an adult, with well fused coronal sutures. The metatarsals were level with the skull cap fragment and only 40 cm distant from it, which suggests that the burial might have been flexed.

At site GtJc7, an extensive, dark brown stain about 8 m long with a maximum vertical dimension of about 40 cm was evident in a road cut through reddish, clayey colluvium. The long axis of the (midden?) stain was oriented close to the horizontal plane; near the longitudinal mid point of the stain and at its base, there occurred a layer of burnt clay a few centimeters thick and about 1 m long. Resting on the burnt clay were several rocks with average maximum dimensions ca. 30 cm and numerous heat spalled fragments of rock. Among the rocks were an enormous jumble of pot sherds and large quantities of charcoal. It is tempting to interpret the mass of sherds as fill in a refuse pit, but the layer of burnt clay, the large stones, and the heat spalled rock fragments strongly suggest a hearth. Perhaps the pots were dumped in the hearth area when the site was abandoned.

It was not possible to connect the BNP ware with any extant society. Furthermore, while the pottery resembles up-country modern wares of East Africa in a number of attributes - notably in the shapes of the vessels - I know of no pottery which has even vaguely similar decorative techniques and motifs.

### Miscellaneous Pottery

Included under this heading are several groups of sherds which, though inadequate as samples for type designation, are sufficiently homogeneous to suggest the possibility that they do, in fact, represent distinct types. One such group is composed of pottery from three sites: GsJd9, GtJc8, and GtJc9.

At each of these sites, there are rim sherds with a characteristic decorative motif - around the rim, a row of short, parallel, more or less vertical lines, usually extending from lip to shoulder. In one case (GtJc8), the technique used in executing the motif appears to be fingernail impression, while in other cases the technique seems to be a combination of impression and punctations. The pottery is moderately well fired, and some of the sherds have very smoothly finished (burnished?) exterior surfaces. Vessel shapes include globular pots with slightly everted, low rims. There are modest quantities of chipped stone associated with the pottery at GtJc8 and 9, and a few highly friable teeth fragments were recovered at the latter site.

Another homogeneous group of sherds occurs at sites GsJd14, GtJd2, and GtJd4. These are rim sherds, which are characterized by having a milled lip. The pottery is fairly thin-walled (6 - 9 mm), well fired, and moderately well finished,

but it lacks any other decoration besides the milled lip. Vessel forms include necked pots with everted rims and open bowls. Iron slag, chipped stone artifacts, and bone are associated with this group of sherds, but the associations are, with one exception, ambiguous, since KSW pottery co-occurs at two of the three sites. However at GtJd4, there is no mixing, and a substantial number of chipped stone artifacts was found at the site. These are described under the heading "Lithic Industries" (below). It may be that the milled lip pottery, if it represents a distinct type, is related to a Stone Age society.

The pottery from the remaining four sites having ware classified either as "Modern" or "Indeterminate" (GsJd11, 15 and 25, and GtJd3; see Table 1) is nondescript, except that the "Modern" sherds are characterized by body decoration consisting of plaited- or twisted-cord rouletting.

### Lithic Industries

In discussing the lithic industries represented in the Kisii collection, it will be convenient to consider, firstly, the assemblages associated with pottery and secondly, those which lacked pottery associations. I will, moreover, ignore the more modest assemblages, since there is little to be gained from discussing a single flake, scraper, etc.

The chipped stone artifacts at GsJd15, in addition to being nondescript, are doubtfully associated with the pottery at the site; therefore, they will not be described further. Equally nondescript are the chipped stone artifacts associated with the pottery at GtJc9.

The twenty stone artifacts from GtJd2 may be divided into two groups: a heavily patinated series consisting of five pieces of waste, and an unpatinated series consisting of the following: crescents (1), blades with alternate retouch on opposite sides (1), outils écaillés (1), utilized flakes (2), cores (2), flakes (4), and chips and chunks (4). The thirty-seven obsidian artifacts from GtJd4 were composed of backed knives/points (4), angle burins (3), dihedral burins (1), outils écaillés (6), utilized pieces (11), cores (3), flakes (4), and chips and chunks (5). It will be recalled that rim sherds with milled lips are present at both of the sites discussed in this paragraph. The lithic assemblages at GtJd2 and 4, though limited, are broadly comparable with Late Stone Age assemblages elsewhere in East Africa.

Substantial samples of chipped stone artifacts unassociated with pottery were collected at two sites: GsJd1 and GtJc5. The assemblage from the former consists of seven heavily patinated artifacts (one chopper/core, two flakes, and four chips and chunks) and forty-eight fresh artifacts, composed of the following: crescents (1), angle burins (3), dihedral burins (3), utilized and/or retouched miscellaneous pieces (2), utilized pieces (6), cores (2), flakes (15), and chips and chunks (16). The site is exposed by a road cut with a maximum vertical section of about three meters, through which are scattered several pebble stringers, presumably representing very temporary former land surfaces. The artifacts appear to be concentrated in and on the pebble stringers. Both series are rather nondescript, although the

presence of a crescent and the high incidence of burins in the fresh series suggests a Late Stone Age affinity.

The artifacts at GtJc5 are composed of the following: core scrapers (1), convex scrapers (3), side scrapers (2), notched pieces (1), denticulates (1), burins (6), points with alternate retouch on one edge and ventral retouch on the other (1), broken unifacial points (?) with trimmed butts (1), outils écaillés (1), utilized pieces (10), cores (3), flakes (11), chips and chunks (4). The site is exposed in a road bed - that is, the road surface coincides with the top of the artifact-bearing stratum - and the artifacts were collected from the road surface. Diagnostic tools are absent from the collection, which could be of either Late or Middle Stone Age affinity.

### Rock Art

There is a very interesting group of rock engravings at site GtJc4, known to the people of the locality as "Gotichaki". The images are rather deeply pecked in a steatite(?) outcrop near the top of the westward-facing flank of a prominent hill. Geometric forms involving concentric circles and series of parallel, curved lines are most commonly represented, but some of the images seem to portray flowers and animals, and one has a distinctly feline quality. Also carved in the rock are several sets of "mbau" holes. Although it is impossible to determine the age of the engravings, a local resident (Mr. Mogoi Gwanda Mosioma, who is 100+ years old) says that his parents claimed they were "placed there by God" - i.e., that they were present when his parents arrived in the area. This suggests that they are at least 100 years old.

The engravings do not to my knowledge resemble closely any rock art elsewhere in East Africa. They are threatened by obliteration due to the softness of the rock and constant trampling by people; it is strongly urged that steps be taken to preserve this interesting relic of Kenya's past.

### Chronology

There is no indication of the relative ages of the various ceramic traditions discussed here from the sites examined during the survey. Four of the five radiocarbon samples collected have been submitted for analysis - two from KSW sites (GsJd6 and 21), one from a BNP site (GtJc7), and one from a site with pottery of indeterminate type but having distinctive attributes (GtJc9).

The results of the radiocarbon assays are listed in Table 2. It is at once apparent that the oral identification of the KSW pottery with the Gusii is highly questionable, since the dates for this ware are very early - at least eight centuries earlier than the earliest estimate for the arrival of the Gusii people in Kisii District. Indeed, the radiocarbon dating of the BNP ware suggests that it is a more likely candidate for proto-Gusii pottery, although one must be cautious about drawing inferences on a single radiocarbon assay. Such caution should be extended to all the dates listed in Table 2 - they are interesting, but they cannot by themselves serve as a basis for historical inference.



Nevertheless, the early dates for KSW pottery, which overlap the ranges for both "neolithic" and Early Iron Age wares in East Africa (Bower n.d. & Sutton 1971) and thus lie close to the earliest appearance of food-producing economies, lend urgency to the need for extensive excavation of selected KSW sites. Although little evidence of subsistence behavior was found at the KSW sites, the presence of a house floor at one site and a posthole(?) at another suggests a sedentary way of life, possibly related to a food-producing economy. It is especially important to determine whether iron-working is unambiguously included in the technological repertoire of the KSW sites.

#### References

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Table 1: Inventory of Finds in Stratigraphic Context, Kisii District

Site <sup>1</sup>	Map Reference <sup>2</sup>	Pottery <sup>3</sup>	Slag and/or Tuyères		Chipped stone		Radio-carbon	Bon
					Obsidian	Other		
Gs Jc 2	855 177					2		
" 3	840 202	KSW (1)						
" 4	862 122	KSW (3)						
Gs Jd 1	977 247					55		
" 3	048 341	KSW (1)						
" 4	967 336	KSW (2)						
" 6	022 287	KSW (7)					x	
" 9	968 316	INDET (1)						
" 10	993 293	KSW (1)						
" 11	025 258	KSW(1), MOD(1)	Abundant					
" 12	957 355	KSW (5)				1		x
" 13	961 367	KSW? (1)						
" 14	992 406	KSW(1), INDET(6)	Present		1			x
" 15	111 428	INDET(1), MOD?(1)				13		
" 16	121 427	KSW (1)				2		
" 18	983 189	KSW (3)						
" 19	965 228	KSW (2)				1		x
" 20	967 232	KSW (3)						
" 21	122 269	KSW (14)					x	
" 22	122 269	KSW (3)						
" 24	122 272	KSW (2)						x
" 25	197 376	INDET (7)			x		x	x
" 29	976 385	KSW(1), BNP(1)						

Site <sup>1</sup>	Map Reference <sup>2</sup>	Pottery <sup>3</sup>	Slag and/or Tuyères	Chipped stone Obsidian Other	Radio- carbon	Bone
Gs Jc 1	254 450	KSW (1)		x		
Gt Jc 1	949 138	KSW (6)				
" 2	941 133	BNP (1)	Present		1	x
" 3	869 148	KSW (0)				
" 4	835 147 <sup>5</sup>					
" 5	817 148				45	
" 7	926 099	BNP (23)				x
" 8	945 022	INDET (2)			1	
" 9	906 013	INDET (8)		6	3	x
" 10	906 013				1	
" 11	888 012	KSW (3)				
Gt Jä 1	036 164	KSW (1)				
" 2	034 158	KSW(1), INDET(1)		3	17	
" 3	071 988	MOD? (1)				
" 4	017 972	INDET (3)		37		x
" 5	992 162	BNP (2)				

Notes to Table 1

1. Sites are designated according to the Standard African Site Enumeration System described in Nelson (1971).

2. Map Reference coordinates are based on 1:50,000 maps, series Y 731; the following equivalence exists between the maps employed and the site enumeration system: G1 Jc = 74/3, G1 Jd = 74/4, Gm Jc = 88/1, Gm Jd = 88/2, Gn Jc = 88/3, Gn Jd = 88/4.

3. Abbreviations: t-c roul = twisted-cord rouletting, p-c roul = plaited-cord rouletting, indet. = indeterminate. The numbers in parentheses refer to decorated and/or rim sherds.

Table 2: Radiocarbon Dating of the Kisii District Pottery\*

Sample	Ware	Site	Date
N-1234	KSW	GsJd6	200 B.C. $\pm$ 180
N-1235	KSW	GsJd21	730 A.D. $\pm$ 80
N-1236	BNP	GtJc7	1780 A.D. $\pm$ 80
N-1237	INDET.	GtJc9	260 A.D. $\pm$ 90

\* (5750 years half-life.)