Confluence 19°30’N-24°00’E, Northeast Chad
(20 October 2005)

The Erdi Ma (Erdi = war or hostile land, Ma = East in the Goran language) is an uninhabited plateau in the extreme northeast corner of Chad near the Libyan and Sudanese borders. To the present day, the c. 15,000 km² large sandstone table-land ranks among the least known regions of the Sahara, if not of the African continent, because of its remoteness, lack of water, hostility to life and notorious insecurity.

It was the Egyptian diplomat Ahmed Hassanein Bey who first reported about the Erdi Ma, which he crossed in May 1923 on his famed 3,500 km camel journey from Sollum in Libya via the previously unlocated Jebel Ouenat to El Obeid in Sudan. Following his Kufra guides along the western side of the plateau and travelling by night, he could not provide any description but a few photographs in his classic book “The Lost Oases”. The following motorized expeditions by the Egyptian prince Kemal el-Din in 1925 and the British officer Ralph Bagnold in 1932 only touched on the northeast corner of the Erdi Ma. The French camel corps officers Barboteu and Garbit in 1935 and 1937 as well as the French geological surveys in the mid-1950s and early 1960s also neglected the central part of the Erdi Ma. For this reason, most of the Erdi Ma has remained scientifically blank and without ground truth for the interpretation of the steadily improving remote sensing data available since the first Gemini XI space photograph of 1966.

It was left to a multidisciplinary expedition of the Collaborative Research Center “Arid Climate, Adaptation and Cultural Change in Africa” (ACACIA) at the University of Cologne, Germany, under the auspices of the Chadian Centre National d’Appui à la Recherche (CNAR) to begin to fill this gap in knowledge. The 12-person mission was headed by geoarchaeologist Stefan Kröpelin and accompanied by a film team of the Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) doing a documentary titled “Sahara: Aufbruch ins Ungewisse” (Sahara: Departure into the Uncertain; video). Writer Raoul Schrott published an account of the field trip and the events at the confluence in his book “Die Fünfte Welt. Ein Logbuch” (Haymon, Innsbruck-Wien, 2007, ISBN 978-3-85218-524-8).

The expedition reached the southern edge of the Erdi Ma after a two-week journey from the Chadian capital N’Djamena with 5 vehicles on 20 October 2005. The following survey resulted in the first geological, geomorphological, archaeological and biological observations on the barren plateau. Primarily for climatic and geohydrological reasons, the inner Erdi Ma proved to be the perhaps most inanimate part of the Sahara. Even during the “Green Sahara” about 10,000-6,000 years ago, it seems to have been a barrier zone hostile to prehistoric life, rather than a place for settlement, hunting or grazing, or even for passage (article).

The confluence 19°30’N - 24°00’E was reached 25 October 2005 at 16:00 local time. It lies in the middle of a Mars-like, completely featureless plain without any visible landmarks or vegetation at the horizon all around a 360° angle. In the only reference, François Garbit’s
logbook, the locality has been called “the junction of the three empires France, England and Italy”. A photo taken on 30 December 1937 shows the little stone cairn erected in 1922 by the English captain Carrier, a member of the “Mission de délination de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française et du Soudan Anglo-Egyptien” led by Lt-Colonel Grossard and charged to delimit the borderline between the French and British colonies. In spite of an hour-long spiral search with our 5 vehicles, we could not find it. The possibly collapsed stone cairn is supposed to lie several kilometres off the true GPS position, not a surprise regarding the positioning facilities available at the time. A new pile of stones with a short note has been erected at the correct position.

**Participants of the field trip to NE Chad, 9 October - 5 November 2005:**
Dr. Stefan Kröpelin, geoarcheologist and expedition leader  
Dr. Frank Darius, botanist  
Dr. Sven Oehm, cartographer  
Dr. Meike Meerpohl, ethnologist  
Dr. Raoul Schrott, writer  
Wolfram Schiebener, film director  
Hans Jakobi, cameraman  
Rupert Scheele, soundman  
Mahamat Hamdo, representative of CNAR  
Adoum Fadjaq, driver and mechanic  
Ali Mohammad Anur, driver and mechanic  
Rigobert, cook

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# 1: View of confluence at junction of the Chadian, Libyan and Sudanese borders
# 2: GPS photo

# 3: View south from vehicle at confluence
# 4: Group photo at confluence

# 5: Looking for the 1922 stone cairn
(« la bouteille »). C'est un petit rocher de 15 mètres de haut dont les pentes possèdent de bons abris naturels qui furent utilisés autrefois quand la route de l’Erdi à Al Aouenat était parcourue par les cara-


# 6: Stone cairn as in 1937