Dietary options and behavior suggested by plant biomarker evidence in an early human habitat

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The availability of plants and freshwater shapes the diets and social behavior of chimpanzees, our closest living relative. However, limited evidence about the spatial relationships shared between ancestral human (hominin) remains, edible resources, refuge, and freshwater leaves the influence of local resources on our species' evolution open to debate. Exceptionally well-preserved organic geochemical fossils—biomarkers—preserved in a soil horizon resolve different plant communities at meter scales across a contiguous 25,000 m^2 archaeological land surface at Olduvai Gorge from about 2 Ma. Biomarkers reveal hominins had access to aquatic plants and protective woods in a patchwork landscape, which included a spring-fed wetland near a woodland that both were surrounded by open grassland. Numerous cut-marked animal bones are located within the wooded area, and within meters of wetland vegetation delineated by biomarkers for ferns and sedges. Taken together, plant biomarkers, clustered bone debris, and hominin remains define a clear spatial pattern that places animal butchery amid the refuge of an isolated forest patch and near freshwater with diverse edible resources.

biomarker | leaf wax | carbon isotope | paleoecology | human evolution

Spatial patterns in archaeological remains provide a glimpse into the lives of our ancestors (1–5). Although many early hominin environments are interpreted as grassy or open woodlands (6–8), fossil bones and plant remains are rarely preserved together in the same settings. As a result, associated landscape reconstructions commonly lack coexisting fossil evidence for hominins and local-scale habitat (microhabitat) that defined the distribution of plant foods, refuge, and water (7). This problem is exacerbated by the discontinuous nature and low time resolution often available across ancient soil (paleosol) horizons, including hominin archaeological localities. One notable exception is well-time-correlated 1.8-million-y-old paleosol horizons exposed at Olduvai Gorge. Associated horizons contain exceptionally preserved plant biomarkers along with many artifacts and fossilized bones. Plant biomarkers, which previously revealed temporal patterns in vegetation and water (8), are well preserved in the paleosol horizon and document plant-type spatial distributions that provide an ecosystem context (9, 10) for resources that likely affected the diets and behavior of hominin inhabitants.

Plant biomarkers are delivered by litter to soils and can distinguish plant functional type differences in standing biomass over scales of 1–1,000 m^2 (11). Trees, grasses, and other terrestrial plants produce leaf waxes that include long-chain *n*-alkanes such as hentriacontane (nC_{31}), whereas aquatic plants and phytoplankton produce midchain homologs (e.g., nC_{23}) (12, 13). The ratio of shorter- versus long-chain *n*-alkane abundances distinguish relative organic matter inputs from aquatic versus terrestrial plants to sediments (13):

$$P_{aq} = (nC_{23} + nC_{25}) / (nC_{23} + nC_{25} + nC_{29} + nC_{31}).$$

Sedges and ferns are prolific in many tropical ecosystems (14). These plants both have variable and therefore nondiagnostic *n*-alkane profiles. However, sedges produce distinctive phenolic compounds [e.g., 5-*n*-tricosylresorcinol ($^nR_{23}$)] and ferns produce distinctive midchain diols [e.g., 1,13-dotriacontanediol (C_{32}-diol)] (*SI Discussion*).

Lignin monomers provide evidence for woody and nonwoody plants. This refractory biopolymer occurs in both leaves and wood, serves as a structural tissue, and accounts for up to half of the total organic carbon in modern vegetation (11). Lignin is composed of three phenolic monomer types that show distinctive distributions in woody and herbaceous plant tissues. Woody tissues from dicotyledonous trees and shrubs contain syringyl (*S*) and vanillyl (*V*) phenols (12), whereas cinnamyl (*C*) phenols are exclusively found in herbaceous tissues (12). The relative abundance of *C* versus *V* phenols (*C*/*V*) is widely used to distinguish between woody and herbaceous inputs to sedimentary and soil organic matter (15).

Plant biomarker $^{13}C/^{12}C$ ratios (expressed as $\delta^{13}C$ values) are sensitive indicators of community composition, ecosystem structure, and climate conditions (8). Most woody plants and forbs in eastern Africa use C_3 photosynthesis (6), whereas arid-adapted grasses use C_4 photosynthesis (8, 14). These two pathways discriminate differently against ^{13}C during photosynthesis, resulting in characteristic $\delta^{13}C$ values for leaf waxes derived from C_3 (about –36.0‰) and C_4 (–21.0‰) plants (16). Carbon isotopic abundances of phenolic monomers of lignin amplify the C_3–C_4 difference and range between *ca*. –34.0‰ (C_3) and –14.0‰ (C_4) in tropical ecosystems (15). Terrestrial C_3 plant $\delta^{13}C$ values decrease with increased exposure to water, respired CO_2, and shade (8), with lowest values observed in moist regions with dense canopy (17). Although concentration and $\delta^{13}C$ values of atmospheric CO_2

Significance

Humans evolved in response to the availability of plant and water resources over space and through time. Their influence on our species' evolution is debated, though, because archives of their spatial distribution are scarce at early human (hominin) localities. Meter-scale vegetation patterns are revealed from sedimentary plant biomarkers across an archaeological horizon at Olduvai Gorge (FLK *Zinj*). Biomarkers evince a varied local landscape with a woodland patch near a small freshwater wetland, surrounded by an open grassland landscape. Biomarkers from the wetland indicate diverse edible plants near potable water. The coexistence of butchered large animal bones and hominin remains, including juveniles, within an isolated biomarker-delineated wooded microhabitat at FLK *Zinj* provide support for early provisioning behaviors by our ancestors.

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can affect C_3 plant $\delta^{13}C$ values (17), this influence is not relevant to our work here, which focuses on a single time window (*SI Discussion*). The large differences in leaf-wax $\delta^{13}C$ values between closed C_3 forest to open C_4 grassland are consistent with soil organic carbon isotope gradients across canopy-shaded ground surfaces (6) and serve as a quantitative proxy for woody cover (f_{woody}) in savannas (8).

As is observed for nonhuman primates, hominin dietary choices were likely shaped by ecosystem characteristics over habitat scales of 1–1,000 m^2 (3–5). To evaluate plant distributions at this small spatial scale (9), we excavated 71 paleosol samples from close-correlated trenches across a ~25,000-m^2 area that included FLK *Zinjanthropus* Level 22 (FLK *Zinj*) at Olduvai Gorge (Fig. 1). Recent excavations (18–21) at multiple trenches at four sites (FLK^{NN}, FLK^{N}, FLK, and FLK^{S}, Fig. 1*D*) exposed a traceable thin (5–50 cm), waxy green to olive-brown clay horizon developed by pedogenic alterations of playa lake margin alluvium (22). Weak stratification and irregular redox stains suggest initial soil development occurred during playa lake regression (18, 22), around 1.848 Ma (ref. 23 and *SI Discussion*). To date, craniodental remains from at least three hominin individuals (18–20), including pre-adolescent early *Homo* and *Paranthropus boisei*, were recovered from FLK *Zinj*. Fossils and artifacts embedded in the paleosol horizon often protrude into an overlying airfall tuff (18, 19), which suggests fossil remains were catastrophically buried in situ under volcanic ash. Rapid burial likely fostered the exceptional preservation of both macrofossils (10) and plant biomarkers across the FLK *Zinj* land surface.

Plant biomarker signatures reveal distinct types of vegetation juxtaposed across the FLK *Zinj* land surface (Figs. 2–4 and Fig. S1). In the northwest, FLK^{NN} trenches show high nC_{23} $\delta^{13}C$ values (Fig. 2*B*) as well as high *C*/*V* and P_{aq} values (Figs. 3 and 4*A*). They indicate floating or submerged aquatic plants (macrophytes) in standing freshwater (13), a finding that is consistent with nearby low-temperature freshwater carbonates (tufa), interpreted to be deposited from spring waters (22). Adjacent FLK^{N} trenches have lower P_{aq} values (Fig. 4*A*) with occurrences of fern-derived C_{32}-diol and sedge-derived $^{n}R_{23}$ (Fig. 2 *C* and *D*). These biomarker distributions indicate an abrupt (around 10 m) transition from aquatic to wetland vegetation. Less than 100 m away (Fig. 1*C*), low nC_{31} $\delta^{13}C$ values (Fig. 2*A*) and low *C*/*V* and very low P_{aq} values (Figs. 3 and 4*A*) collectively indicate dense woody cover (Fig. 4*B*). In the farthest southeastern (FLK^{S}) trenches, high *C*/*V* values and high $\delta^{13}C$ values for *C* lignin phenols (Fig. 3) indicate open C_4 grassland.

Biomarkers define a heterogeneous landscape at Olduvai and suggest an influence of local resources on hominin diets and behavior. It is recognized (2, 24–26) that early *Homo* species and *P. boisei* had similar physiological characteristics. These similarities in physical attributes suggest behavioral differences were what allowed for overlapping ranges and local coexistence

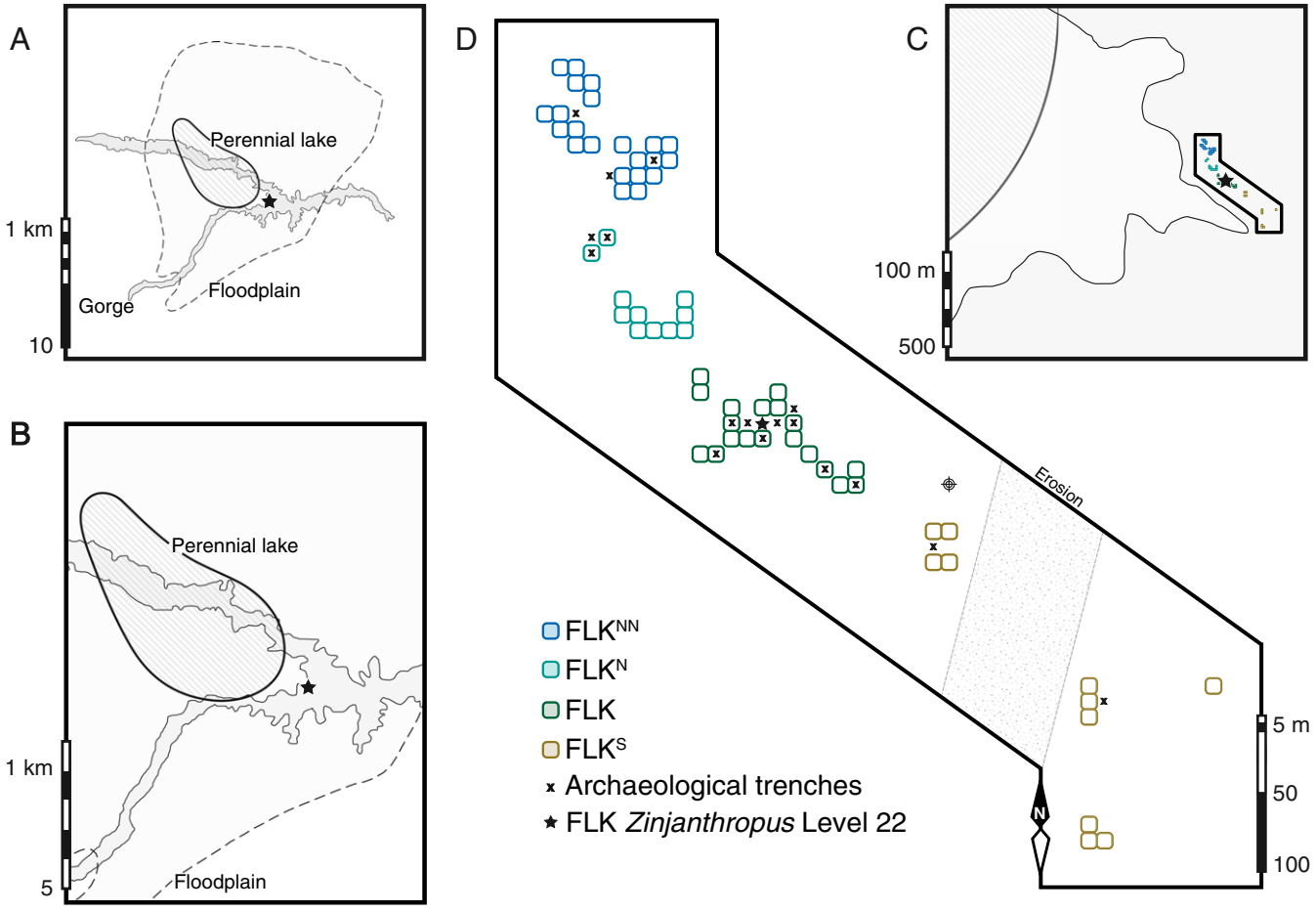

Fig. 1. Location and map of FLK *Zinj* paleosol excavations. (*A* and *B*) Location of FLK *Zinj* as referenced to reconstructed depositional environments at Olduvai Gorge during the early Pleistocene (18, 22) and the modern gorge walls. The perennial lake contained shallow saline–alkaline waters that frequently flooded the surrounding playa margin (i.e., floodplain) flats. (*C*) Outline of FLK *Zinj* paleosol excavation sites used for our spatial biomarker reconstructions. (*D*) Concentric (5 m) gridded distribution map of FLK *Zinj* paleosol excavations relative to previous archaeological trenches (18–21). Major aggregate complexes (FLK^{NN}, FLK^{N}, FLK, and FLK^{S}) are color-coded to show excavation-site associations.

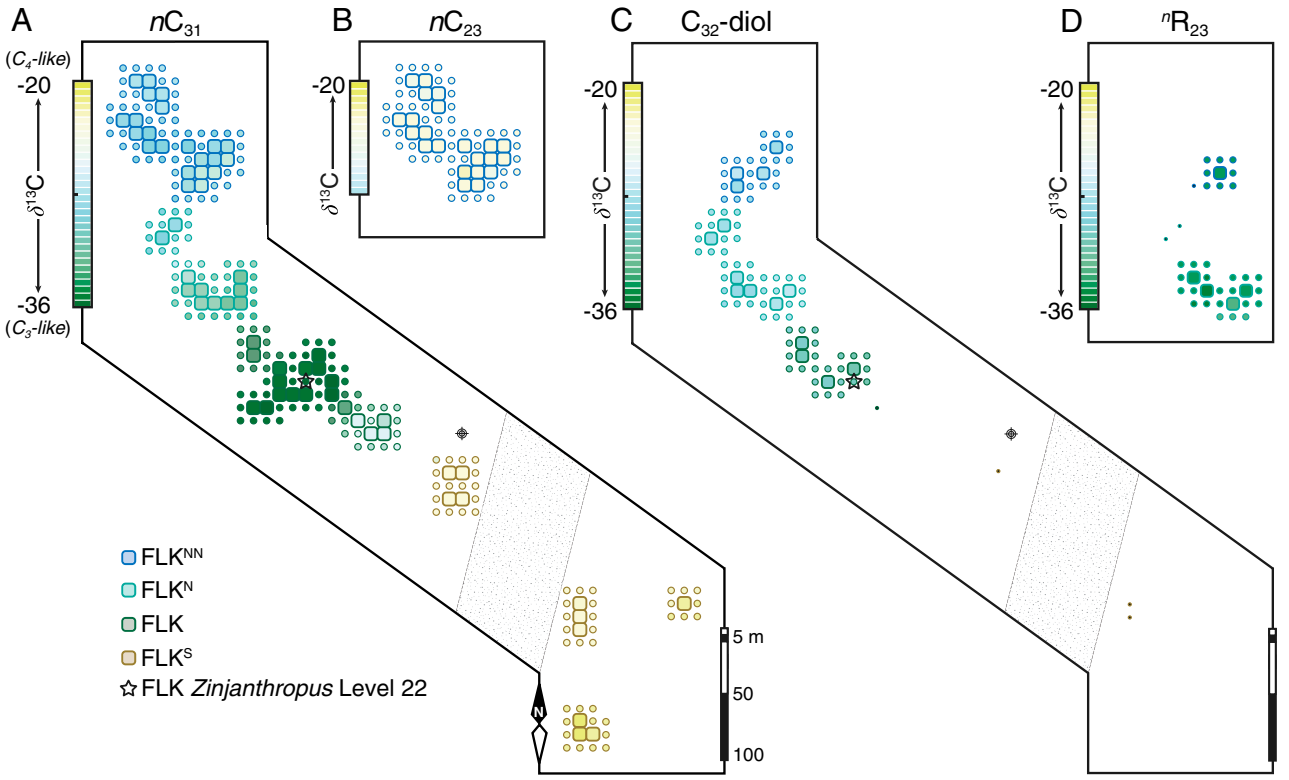

Fig. 2. Spatial distributions and $\delta^{13}C$ values for plant biomarkers across FLK *Zinj*. Measured and modeled $\delta^{13}C$ values (large and smaller circles, respectively) are shown for (*A*) nC_{31} from terrestrial plants, (*B*) nC_{23} from (semi)aquatic plants, (*C*) C_{32}-diol from ferns, and (*D*) $^{n}R_{23}$ from sedges (see refs. 12 and 13 and *SI Discussion*). Modeled values [inverse distance-weighted (9)] account for spatial autocorrelation (15-m radius) in standing biomass (35) over scales of soil organic matter accumulation (11). Black dots represent paleosols with insufficient plant biomarker concentrations for isotopic analysis.

(sympatry) of both hominins. For instance, differences in seasonal subsistence strategies or different behavior during periods of drought and limited food could have reduced local hominin competition and fostered diversification via niche specialization (27–29).

Physical and isotopic properties of fossil teeth indicate *P. boisei* was more water-dependent [low enamel $\delta^{18}O$ values (24)] and consumed larger quantities of abrasive, ^{13}C-enriched foodstuffs [flat-worn surfaces (25) and high enamel $\delta^{13}C$ values (26)] than coexisting early *Homo* species. Although ^{13}C-enriched enamel is commonly attributed to consumption of C_4 grasses or meat from grazers (14), this was not likely, because *P. boisei* craniodental features are inconsistent with contemporary gramnivores (24, 25) or extensive uncooked flesh mastication (26). Numerous scholars have proposed the nutritious underground storage organs (USOs) of C_4 sedges were a staple of hominin diets (14, 24, 26, 27). Consistent with this suggestion, occurrences of $^{n}R_{23}$ attest to the presence of sedges at FLK^{NN} and FLK^{N} (Fig. 2*D*). However, the low $\delta^{13}C$ values measured for $^{n}R_{23}$ at these same sites (Fig. 2*D* and Fig. S2) indicate C_3 photosynthesis (12, 16), a trait common in modern sedges that grow in alkaline wetlands and lakes (30) (Fig. S3). Thus, biomarker signatures support the presence of C_3 sedges in the wetland area of FLK *Zinj*.

Alternative foodstuffs with abrasive, ^{13}C-enriched biomass include seedless vascular plants (cryptogams), such as ferns and lycophytes [e.g., quillworts (27, 30)]. Ferns are widely distributed throughout eastern Africa in moist and shaded microhabitats (31) and are often found near dependable sources of drinking water (32). Today, ferns serve as a dietary resource for humans and nonhuman primates alike (27), and fiddlehead consumption is consistent with the inferred digestive physiology [salivary proteins (33)] and the microwear on molars (34) of *P. boisei* in eastern Africa (25, 26). Ferns were present at FLK^{N}, based on measurements of C_{32}-diol (Fig. 2*D*). Further, the high

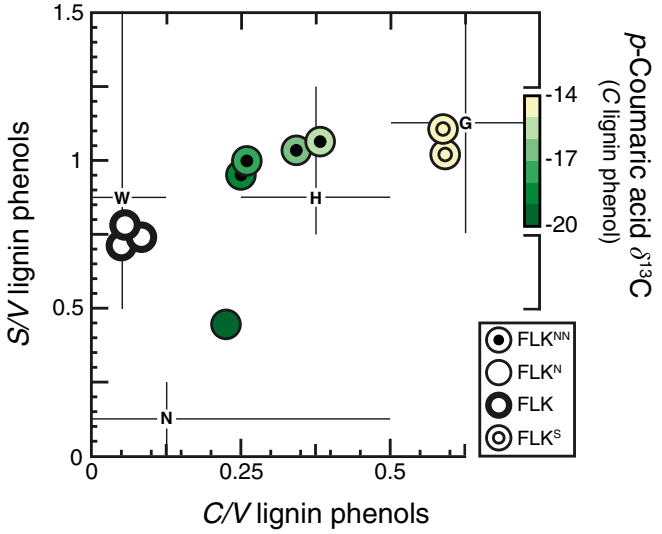

Fig. 3. Molecular and isotopic signatures for lignin phenols across FLK *Zinj*. Bivariate plots are shown for diagnostic lignin compositional parameters (see refs. 12 and 15 and Table S1) associated with aggregate excavation complexes (Fig. 1*C*). Symbols are colored according to respective $\delta^{13}C$ values for the *C* lignin phenol, *p*-coumaric acid. FLK symbols are uncolored due to insufficient *p*-coumaric acid concentrations for isotopic analysis. Representative lignin compositional parameters (12, 15) are shown for monocotyledonous herbaceous tissues (G), dicotyledonous herbaceous tissues (H), cryptogams (N), and dicotyledonous woody tissues (W).

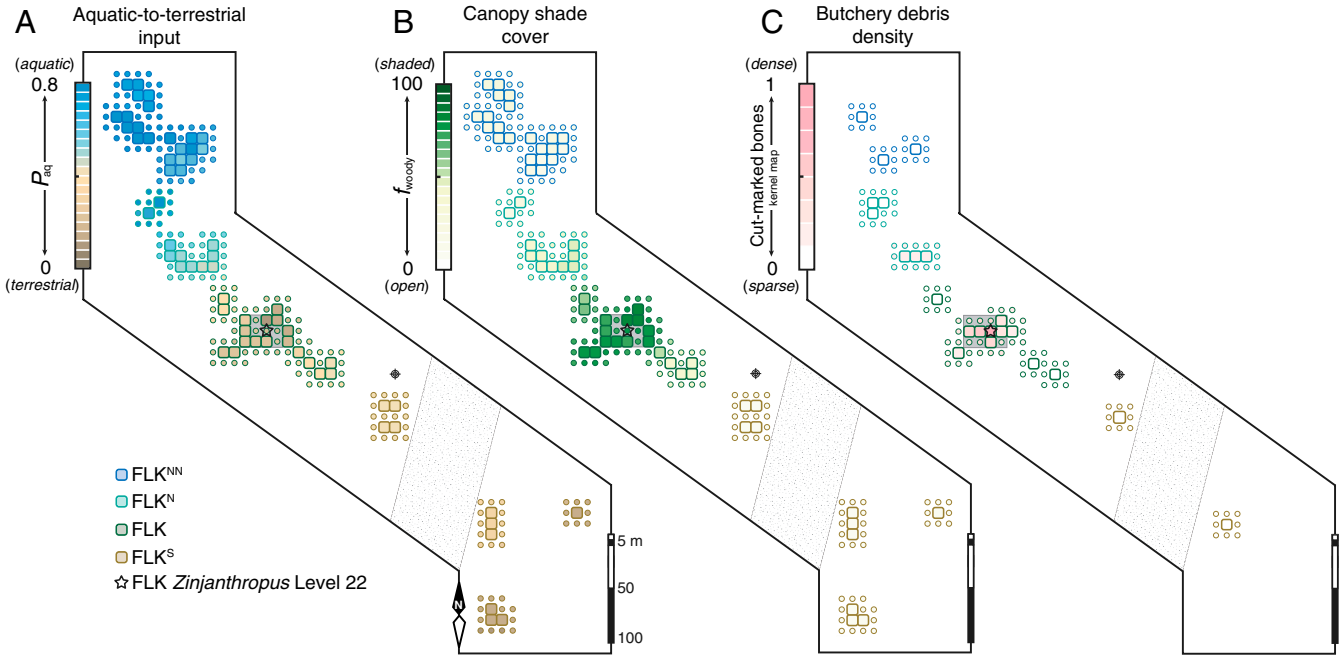

Fig. 4. Spatial relationships shared between local plant resources and hominin remains. Measured and modeled values (large and smaller circles, respectively) are shown for (*A*) P_{aq} (13) and (*B*) f_{woody} (8). Modeled values [inverse distance-weighted (9)] account for spatial autocorrelation (15-m radius) in standing biomass (35) over scales of soil organic matter accumulation (11). (*C*) Kernel density map of cut-marked bones (18–21) across the FLK *Zinj* land surface (Fig. S4). High estimator values indicate hotspots of hominin butchery (Fig. S5). A shaded rectangle captures the area (*ca*. 0.68 probability mass) with highest cut-marked bone densities and is shown in *A* and *B* for reference.

$\delta^{13}C$ values measured for these compounds are consistent with significant fern consumption by *P. boisei* at Olduvai Gorge.

Ferns and grasses were not the only plant foods present during the time window documented by FLK *Zinj*. Further, the exclusive reliance on a couple of dietary resources was improbable for *P. boisei,* because its fossils occur in diverse localities (24–26). Aquatic plants are an additional candidate substrate, as evidenced by high P_{aq} values at FLK^{NN} and FLK^{N} (Fig. 4*A*). Floating and submerged plants proliferate in wetlands throughout eastern Africa today (13, 14), and many produce nutritious leaves and rootstock all year long (27, 28). Although C_4 photosynthesis is rare among modern macrophytes (30), they can assimilate bicarbonate under alkaline conditions, which results in C_4-like isotope signatures in their biomass (30). Their leaf waxes, such as nC_{23} (13), are both present and carry ^{13}C-enriched signatures at FLK^{NN} and FLK^{N} (Fig. 2*B*). It is also likely that aquatic macrophytes sustained invertebrates and fish with comparably ^{13}C-enriched biomass, as they do in modern systems (14), and we suggest aquatic animal foods could have been important in *P. boisei* diets (27, 28).

Biomarkers across the FLK *Zinj* soil horizon resolve clear patterns in the distribution of plants and water and suggest critical resources that shaped hominin existence at Olduvai Gorge. The behavioral implications of local conditions require understanding of regional climate and biogeography (3–5, 7), because hominin species likely had home ranges much larger than the extent of excavated sites at FLK *Zinj*. Lake sediments at Olduvai Gorge include numerous stacked tuffs with precise radiometric age constraints (23). These tephrostratigraphic correlations (21) tie the FLK *Zinj* landscape horizon to published records of plant biomarkers in lake sediments that record climate cycles and catchment-scale variations in ecology. Correlative lake sediment data indicate the wet and wooded microhabitats of FLK *Zinj* sat within a catchment dominated by arid C_4 grassland (8). Under similarly arid conditions today, only a small fraction of landscape area (*ca*. 0.05) occurs within 5 km of either forest or standing freshwater (35). Given a paucity of shaded refuge and potable water in the catchment, the concentration of hominin butchery debris (18–21) exclusively within the forest microhabitat and adjacent to a freshwater wetland (Fig. 4) is notable. We suggest the spatial patterns defined by both macro- and molecular fossils reflect hominins engaged in social transport of resources (1–5), such as bringing animal carcasses and freshwater-sourced foods from surrounding grassy or wetland habitats to a wooded patch that provided both physical protection and access to water.

Materials and Methods

Plant Biomarker Extraction and Isolation. Freeze-dried and powdered paleosol samples (10–20 g dry weight, $n = 71$) were extracted by accelerated solvent extraction (Dionex ASE 200 system) with 90:10 dichloromethane (DCM) to methanol by volume. Total lipid extracts were separated into fractions over activated silica gel by elution with hexane (apolar), DCM, and methanol. Apolar fractions were further separated over silver-impregnated alumina by elution with hexane (saturated apolar). Then, *n*-alkanes were separated from saturated apolar fractions by zeolitic (5 Å) sieve. Once extracted, residual paleosols were oxidized under alkaline conditions and acidified with hydrochloric acid. Lignin phenols were recovered by liquid extraction with diethyl ether. Additional details are provided in *SI Materials and Methods*.

Molecular and Isotopic Analysis. Molecular signatures were characterized by GC-MS (*SI Materials and Methods*). Polar fractions and lignin phenols were derivatized with N,O-bis(trimethylsilyl)trifluoracetamide (BSTFA) in pyridine. Isotopic signatures were characterized by gas chromatography-combustion-isotope-ratio monitoring mass spectrometry and expressed in standard permil (‰) notation relative to Vienna Pee Dee Belemnite (VPDB):

$$\delta^{13}C = 1{,}000\left(R_{sample}/R_{standard} - 1\right),\ R = {}^{13}C/{}^{12}C.$$

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