

## SEX, SPIRITS AND SOCIETY

Leanne George

### A bit of context

Human figures in San rock art are not often explicitly sexed (Parkington 1989:14), but some of the images at RSA MEL8 in the Maclear District of the Eastern Cape Province are sexed in an unusual, exaggerated and unrealistic way. Some of these figures have very fat bodies, whereas others are thin and gangly. The fatter figures are explicitly sexed with exaggerated phallic representations, while the genital areas of the thinner figures are associated with thin red lines (Fig. 1). The visual contrast between the fat and thin figures is striking and leads one to question what the authors' views on concepts such as sex and gender, body shape and fat were. The occurrence of thin, emission-like red lines also generates questions concerning the conceptualisation of sexual and other bodily secretions in the authors' society.

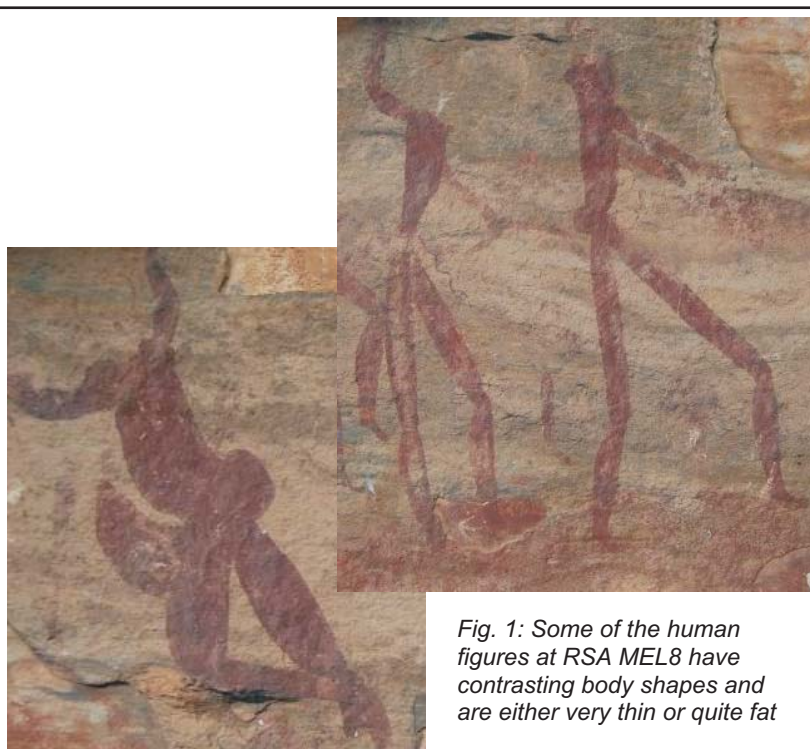


Fig. 1: Some of the human figures at RSA MEL8 have contrasting body shapes and are either very thin or quite fat

One of the particularly fat figures is known as a Large Headed-Significantly Differentiated Figure (LH-SDF). According to Geoffrey Blundell (2004), these images could have represented powerful shamans controlling the painted spaces (Fig. 2). The LH-SDF at RSA MEL8 has an unrealistically large hunting bag from which 19 bows and arrows protrude. LH-SDFs are unique to the area that was previously known as Nomansland and now lies in the northern Eastern Cape Province. Various scholars have studied the social and political tumult of the past 500 years in the area, and have also considered the influence of these conflicted times on classic fine-line and non-fine-line rock art (e.g. Dowson 1995; Blundell 2004; Mallen 2008; Challis 2008; Henry 2010). I shall therefore not relate the historical context of the site in great depth.

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The paintings at RSA MEL8 are painted in the classic San fine-line tradition and contain shaded, polychrome images. I will only give an overview of the San ethnography used to provide an interpretation of some of the images.



Fig. 2: Thomas Dowson's drawing of the LH-SDF at RSA MEL8. Note the unrealistically large hunting bag on the figure's back.  
(drawing: RARI)

We can gain some insight into the views of San society on the human body, sex and gender through ethnographic material (Lewis-Williams 1981). Scholars have been using San ethnography to interpret San rock art for the past four decades, since Patricia Vinnicombe (1976) and Lewis-Williams (1981) realised the art could be explained by studying San mythology. The main sources of ethnographic material include 19<sup>th</sup> century interviews conducted by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek with /Xam-speaking peoples in the Western Cape, the account of a San guide from the Drakensberg (Orpen 1874) and the work of anthropologists among the Kalahari San, for example Lorna Marshall, Matthias Guenther and Megan Biesele.

As a result, we now know that San rock art depicts San beliefs and fragments of the ritual trance dance. During the trance dance, San shamans experience visual and somatic hallucinations and believe that they visit the spirit world to acquire supernatural power, or potency, which they utilise to fulfil certain functions within the community (Lewis-Williams 1981) (Fig. 3).

Through the use of ethnographic analogy, I have argued that the images at RSA MEL8 depict a connection between power, the use of this supernatural potency and the human body, fat and bodily secretions. The human body in San rock art is often depicted in unnatural, unrealistic shapes and postures (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1999) and I also suggested that the unusual body shapes at RSA MEL8 depict metaphorical characteristics. Possible physical explanations for the unusual body shapes could include medical conditions, such as steatopygia (enlarged buttocks) and steatomeria (enlarged breasts), which occurred among Khoisan women (Vinnicombe 1976:237). An example of a disease

responsible for enlarged male genitalia is called Peyronie's disease.

It is, however, unlikely that the images at RSA MEL8 depict any of these conditions because San rock art is an expression of San beliefs and fragments of the ritual trance dance. The notion exists that San societies existed in isolated egalitarianism, where everybody was equal and sexism did not exist, although men hunted and women gathered (Shostak 1981; Katz 1982; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990). However, San societies encountered Bantu-speaking societies and probably did not live in isolation until they encountered Europeans (Wilmsen & Denbow 1990; Barnard 2008; Kent 2002; Sadr 2008).

Diverse groups of people moved into and out of Nomansland during the past 2 000 years and, because the social and political realms were especially tumultuous during the past 500 years, conflicting issues of power and identity are bound to have arisen. The San, of course, conceptualised one form of power as the supernatural potency called *n/om* that shamans obtained during the trance dance. As mentioned, I turned to the ethnography to describe some of the abstract concepts which in the case of RSA MEL8 are associated with the embodiment of *n/om*. I shall now look at some of these concepts, namely fat, sexuality and bodily secretions, power and types of potency.

### The concept of fat

Animal fat was important to the San. They associated antelope fat and honey since both can be fluid and soluble, and one can eat and drink both. People attending a trance dance would rub the bodies of shamans with animal fat to soothe their discomfort



Fig. 3: Photograph of a ritual trance dance in the Kalahari. The man being supported by the two men in the front is a shaman. Trance can be very physically taxing.

(photo: Marshall Expeditions)

(Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1999:70; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:114, 167). Fat and honey alluded to the sex act in the Kalahari (Guenther 1999:156). Exposing the buttocks during ritual or sexual intimacy was seen as erotic, although it was indecent in any other context (Marshall 1959; Lewis-Williams 1981). Fat and blood, notably eland blood, were components of the pigment that shamans used to paint rock art images (Jolly 1986). Antelope fat was also a spiritual metaphor since the substance itself was considered to contain potency (Lewis-Williams 1981).

The San probably saw the eland as a trans-gendered creature as they hailed the bull eland for his great percentage of body fat, which is generally supposed to be a female attribute (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1999: 122). Men were the hunters who extracted this fat and obtained its potency. Virginity and youth were also associated with plumpness and girlhood chubbiness, and young virgins were, in turn, associated with the eland. The fat of both girls and eland was seen as potent. Healthy young women brought the new rain and were likened to shamans while they held this potency (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 154, 163). Both male and female were associated with fat and its qualities, specifically potency. Since shamans could control antelope and possess eland potency (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:104), the images at RSA MEL8 are not exclusively male or biologically sexed. Rather, they embody the qualities associated with the concepts of sex and gender and bodily fat and secretions.

### Sexuality and bodily secretions

Sex was, to an extent, the materialisation of some form of power in the Kalahari: women could choose to withhold sex (Guenther 1999:154) and shamans who possessed a great deal of potency attracted the admiration of women and had more access to sex (Katz 1982:186). Sex was also utilised for other means. The spirits of the dead were chased from the fireside by shamans hurling 'penis insults' or insults regarding sexual secretions at them (Marshall 1962). Another noteworthy bodily secretion is sweat. Shamans in trance placed their hands under their own

armpits and rubbed sweat on others to perform healing functions. Thus sweat also contained potency, which was transferable through touch (Orpen 1874: 10).

There are five interactive figures at RSA MEL8 possibly relating to this transferral of potency through underarm sweat (Fig. 4). Three fat-bodied figures have their arms raised and seem to be reaching for the armpits of the figure in front of them. There is also a thinner figure close by, which is depicted with a thin red line and white emission dangling from the tip of its phallic representation. Thin red lines were also linked to potency, or possibly hallucinations shamans experience during trance (Lewis-Williams et al. 2000). These potent strands were believed to lead the shamans to heaven (Bieseke 1993:70-72; Katz et al. 1997:108). Because of the ability to access heaven and the spirit world, shamans had exclusive access to supernatural potency. This was a distinguishing factor within a community, and implied that shamans had some form of power.

### Power and types of potency

The different types of shamans, each associated with a different type of potency, included healers (*!gi:ten*), game-controlling shamans (*opwaiten-ka !gi:ten*), rain-controlling shamans (*!khwa-ka !gi:ten*) and malevolent shamans (*//xi:ka !gi:ten*). Shamans performed certain functions in their communities and used the supernatural potency they could access to perform these functions. There were both male and female shamans, although there were more males than females (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1999).

Power can become important in a society when it acquires a more sedentary lifestyle and this could have influenced the balance of power and prestige, and the relationships between men and women among the Kalahari San (Katz 1982:252). Very powerful shamans were called *ama ama* among the !Kung, which meant that they had great potency. This power did not make them superior, but enabled them to help the community on a larger scale (Katz 1982:239, 240). Blundell (2004) suggests that LH-SDFs, such as the one at RSA MEL8, could have

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Fig. 4: Drawing of the four fat figures with exaggerated phallic representations and one thin figure toward the left, which has a smaller phallic representation from which a red line and a white emission dangles.





# REVAMPED WORLD-CLASS PALAEOSCIENCES CENTRE AT WITS

Bruce Rubidge and Francis Thackeray

Since 1925, when Professor Raymond Dart announced the famous Taung skull (*Australopithecus africanus*) to the world, the University of the Witwatersrand has been involved in palaeontological research. This extraordinary hominid discovery received such a cool reception from the international scientific fraternity that it dampened Dart's spirits for the next 20 years. In 1945 the internationally renowned palaeontologist Dr Robert Broom, who was then employed at the Transvaal Museum, presented a lecture at Wits stressing the need for the collection and preservation of Karoo fossils because of his concern that South Africa was losing a large part of its priceless palaeontological heritage to erosion every year. He blamed this on what he regarded as an unwilling, unenlightened and mean attitude on the part of state bureaucrats who, by failing to provide sufficient funding to ensure that this heritage was properly cared for, were forsaking their duty to the nation.



*An articulated skeleton of Massospondylus, a South African dinosaur that lived about 190 million years ago*

Fortuitously, Bernard Price, at that time managing director of the Victoria Falls Power Company, was present in the audience and responded to Broom's plea by agreeing to provide £2 000 annually, on condition that the fossil material collected be curated by the university. This led to the establishment of the Bernard Price Institute of Palaeontological Research (BPI). James Kitching, recently demobbed from active service in North Africa, was appointed field officer and first member of staff on 26 October 1945, with the

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*A bone point from a Howiesons Poort level at Sibudu. It is thought to be the oldest example in the world of a bone arrowhead (courtesy of Lyn Wadley; photograph by Lucinda Backwell)*

mandate to collect fossils from the Karoo for the new institute. At Dart's instigation a year later, the focus of the BPI was expanded to include Plio-Pleistocene fossils from Makapansgat as well. Kitching took this literally and spent six months of the year living in a tent in the Karoo and the other six months in the Makapans Valley.

His extensive field programme resulted in large fossil collections that are today housed at the university. Fossil discoveries from the Limeworks site at Makapansgat enabled Dart to pioneer taphonomic studies in South Africa and to develop his famous theory of the osteodontoceric culture of the australopithecines, which postulated that many of the bones found in association with fossils of the ape-man *Australopithecus* were in fact tools. This idea initiated a great deal of research, most notably by Bob Brain. Kitching's reputation as a fossil hunter spread far and wide. In 1970 he was invited to accompany the US Antarctic

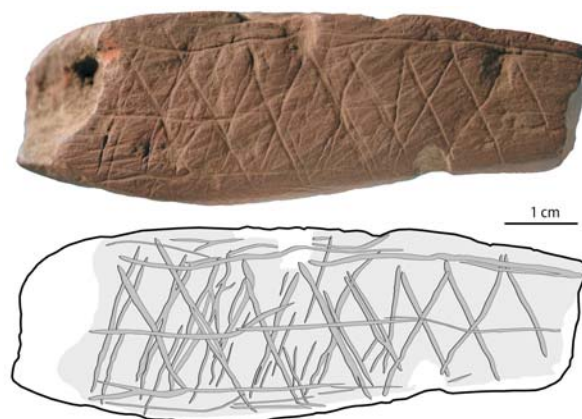
Research Group. Here he discovered numerous fossils of Lystrosaurus Zone age, thus providing corroborative palaeontological evidence for the close correlation between Antarctica and South Africa during Gondwanan times.

From these humble beginnings the BPI has grown and today it has achieved international standing as an important centre of palaeontological training and research. Because of its fossil collections it is also the custodian of a large part of the palaeontological heritage of South Africa. The collections are visited on an ongoing basis by scientists from all over the world. In its 65-year-history the staff and students of the BPI have played a leading role in the advancement of palaeontological knowledge, not only in South Africa but internationally.

Palaeoanthropology has enjoyed a pre-eminent position at Wits since the 1920s, largely because of the groundbreaking research undertaken by Raymond Dart and his successor, Phillip Tobias, who has taken the discipline to even great heights, especially through his work at Sterkfontein where he conducted excavations with Alun Hughes, Ron Clarke and others. The Institute for Human Evolution (IHE) was formed recently to provide continuity to these and other activities, to house the fossil collection and to spearhead ongoing research into human origins, evolution and archaeological heritage. The IHE has been in the limelight following the recent discovery of a new australopithecine, *A. sediba*, announced by Lee Berger and his team in 2010. In addition, Chris Henshilwood and Lyn Wadley have been making extraordinary discoveries at the Blombos and Sibudu archaeological sites.

Wits long ago recognised the significance of the palaeosciences, and the need to encourage research in this field, even during the long period when the teaching of evolution was actively discouraged at South African schools. In the early 2000s the university set up a research thrust into the origin of species and national heritage. For several years it has been raising funds to endow the IHE and to set up proper facilities for the BPI, the IHE and the fossil collections. This endeavour was driven by Professor Belinda Bozzoli (then Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research), assisted by Francis Gerard, who had previously been responsible for managing the establishment of the Origins Centre. Despite the onset of an economic recession in the midst of the fundraising campaign, South Africans, realising the importance of this initiative, generously provided financial support.

A massive building operation, which lasted from August 2009 to September 2010, was set in motion at the Van Riet Lowe Building, which was given a total facelift. This involved rebuilding the internal walls of



*Engraved ochre from Blombos Cave, c. 77 000 years BP*  
(image courtesy of Chris Henshilwood and Francesco d'Errico  
(IHE, Wits University)).

the ground and lower ground floors in their entirety to accommodate administrative offices, technicians' facilities, a collections lecture room and a museum. The first floor, which houses BPI staff and students, was also remodelled completely to provide sufficient office space for all MSc and PhD students as well.

Because accommodation is always at a premium on the Wits campus, innovative solutions had to be found to accommodate the staff and students of the two institutes and the vast fossil collections during building operations. This required a carefully timetabled juggling of people and fossil collections between offices and temporary storage facilities in the Van Riet Lowe and Origins Centre buildings. The disruption was immense. Miraculously, collections manager, Dr Bernhard Zipfel, was able to ensure that all visitors had access to the fossils required. Specially designed new fossil stores with the necessary temperature controls have been equipped with compactor shelving, while drawers have maximised storage place. Many newly equipped and spacious research facilities for staff,

*Minister Naledi Pandor and Deputy Minister Derek Hanekom of the Department of Science and Technology at the opening of the Palaeosciences Centre at Wits University, with Loyiso Nongxa, Vice-Chancellor, and Belinda Bozzoli, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, and Professors Bruce Rubidge and Francis Thackeray.*





students and visiting researchers have been set up and Wits now has extensive fossil preparation facilities, which are essential for undertaking research on South Africa's vast fossil heritage.

With the retirement of John Anderson in 2010, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) has discontinued palaeontology as a research discipline and has loaned its fossil collection to Wits on a long-term basis. Combined with the university fossil plant collections, the huge palaeobotany collection that has been amassed over many years though the efforts of John and Heidi Anderson is a great asset to the BPI. Thanks to the foresight of Marion Bamford in planning requirements for the new building, Wits now has excellent storage and research facilities for the palaeobotanical collections.

The field of palaeontology has been revolutionised by the development of what is increasingly called 'virtual palaeontology'. The growing use of medical computed tomography, industrial high-resolution computed tomography (micro-CT), synchrotron and laser surface scanning has allowed the production of 3D images of fossil specimens. These virtual representations have opened a number of new possibilities for the analysis of specimens. For example, micro-CT scanning captures information about the internal anatomy of a fossil at very high resolution. The Pal-

aeosciences Centre now has, with funding assistance from the National Research Foundation (NRF) and Wits University, and the patient guidance of Kris Carlson of the IHE, a Virtual Image Processing Room that has superior computing facilities with eight workstations running the programmes Avizo and VGstudio Max. This allows the virtual preparation of scanned fossils and facilitates work on morphometrics, shape analysis and restoration. In addition to a micro-CT scanner that will soon be obtained with generous funding from the NRF, the VIP laboratory has surface scanning and microscribe equipment, and houses the Karoo fossil database with GIS capabilities.

The Palaeosciences Centre, which draws together the combined strengths of the university's established palaeoscience research programmes with the aim of creating Africa's foremost centre of excellence, was officially opened by the Minister of Science and Technology, Ms Naledi Pandor, on 17 September 2010. This has brought about a new era in palaeosciences at Wits. Its spacious premises with state-of-the-art research facilities has attracted numerous new students, as well as local and international palaeo-anthropologists, palaeontologists and archaeologists interested in researching the remarkable heritage resources of South Africa.



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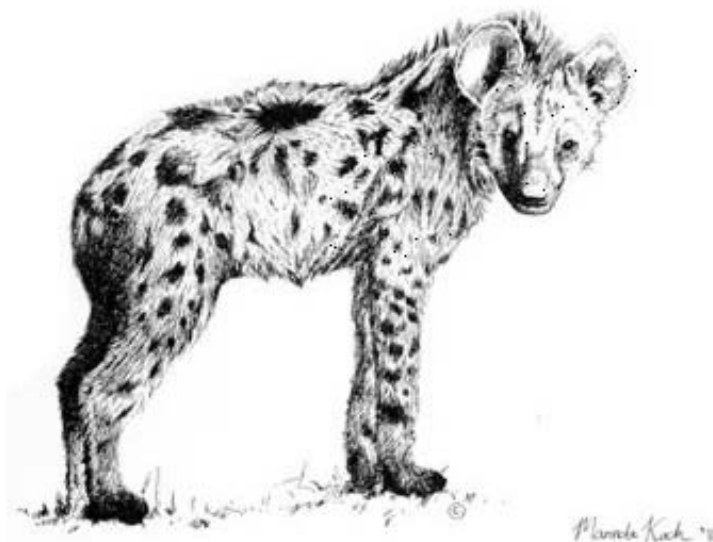
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# MAPPING TRADE IN BOKONI

Tobias Coetzee and Alex Schoeman

The historical Bokoni region in Mpumalanga stretched between Orighstad and Carolina and was occupied by a pre-colonial farming society that built stonewalled homesteads, roads and terraces. The location straddled a strategic area between the interior and the coast and was a key location in the pre-colonial trade system (Delius & Schoeman 2008). Pre-colonial trade footpaths were important, but ephemeral. Their course can be traced, however, through archival and published sources on historical routes, and by examining the distribution of stone-walled sites in Bokoni.

## Change and continuity

European colonisation resulted in a disruption of the lives of many southern African communities. Colonisation was not linear, but was shaped by complex and multi-faceted interaction. These processes facilitated a continuity in the practices of both pre-colonial societies and colonial settlers, as well as the selective incorporation of material cultures and ideas across the colonial frontier. Substantial research has explored the interaction from the perspective of the colonised (e.g. Hall 1997; Reid et al. 1997). But interaction and borrowing was not unidirectional – Biemont & Behrens (2008) reported on the use of African pots in the Voortrekker settlement at Schoemansdal.

It was not only material culture that was borrowed by the colonists. Information about the economy in the interior and ways to navigate its networks was even more important to the survival of the new settlers. Knowledge about trade routes to the east coast was essential for those wishing to participate in trade. An example is that Voortrekkers based their wagon routes to the east coast on earlier African footpaths (De Vaal 1990). Ironically, by virtue of these borrowings the routes of the Boer settlers now allow insight into the trade networks their presence and policies dismantled.

## Wagon routes and trade paths

The Voortrekker expansion into Mpumalanga was in part motivated by the desire to participate in the profitable trade with Delagoa Bay. For example, they settled in Ohrighstad because of the trade possibilities offered by that location (Bergh 1998). Trade was not

limited to southern African communities. Several accounts indicate that among pre-colonial traders could be found Portuguese, Swahili, Muslims and Indians. In 1855, a Muslim trader named Mamoed Amad Saiboe accompanied Pater Joaquim de Santa Rita Montanha to the Limpopo River near the Soutpansberg, and in 1890 an elderly person in Limpopo indicated that when he was a child living to the north of Soutpansberg, traders dressed in long white 'dresses' travelled through the area towards the Rooiberg tin mine (De Vaal 1990).

As to the involvement of local communities in trade, Captain Josia, who lived near Leydsdorp in the Bokoni area, told NJ van Warmelo that black people hailing from Delagoa Bay came to the interior to trade. They accessed the interior through a gorge in the Lebombo Mountains. People from Bokoni also went to the coast to trade (De Vaal 1990).

The main footpath from Delagoa Bay into the northern parts of South Africa led in a northerly direction, crossing the Nkomati and Crocodile Rivers, before continuing via Sabie to Rustplaas. A subsidiary footpath led from Sabie over the Drakensberg to Lydenburg and continued in a north-westerly direction to present-day Polokwane. The key east-west route that linked Rooiberg to Delagoa Bay also led through Lydenburg. To avoid mountainous areas, this footpath followed the Rooiberg–Musina route to the vicinity of Moordrift, next to the Mohalakwena River, and then joined the main route between Lydenburg and Doornkraal (De Vaal 1990).

The trade paths to Delagoa Bay were not suitable for the ox wagon-based transport of the Voortrekkers, who set out to establish reliable wagon routes, although they were still based on the trade paths. The first documented survey took place in 1843, when Andries Potgieter followed a route through Schoemanskloof and along the Crocodile River to Delagoa Bay (Bulpin 2002). In 1844 a second route was established along the Ohrighstad and Casper rivers and through the mountain at Caspersnek. However, this route was not ideal since water was not readily available during winter, which was the best time to travel to the coast because of a reduced incidence of tsetse fly (De Vaal 1990). Consequently, the search for a route to the coast continued.

In January 1847 João Albasini claimed to have found a route to Delagoa Bay with enough water and no tsetse fly. Intensive surveys led to the establishment of a shorter version of this route, but it only became prominent after the Lydenburg goldfields were discovered in 1869 (De Vaal 1990). Albasini and his caravans made use of earlier trade footpaths (De Vaal

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1947) and it is likely that his January 1847 route was based on an old footpath.

Coetzee (2009) mapped the trade footpaths and wagon routes based on information extracted from published (De Vaal 1990; Liebenberg 1990) and archival sources such as the Mpumalanga Roads and Transport Archives (MRTA).<sup>1</sup> This map (see below) illustrates how some of the wagon routes followed footpaths. Coetzee (2009) argues that the historical reuse of these routes could suggest long-term continuity in the routes.

### Bokoni and trade routes

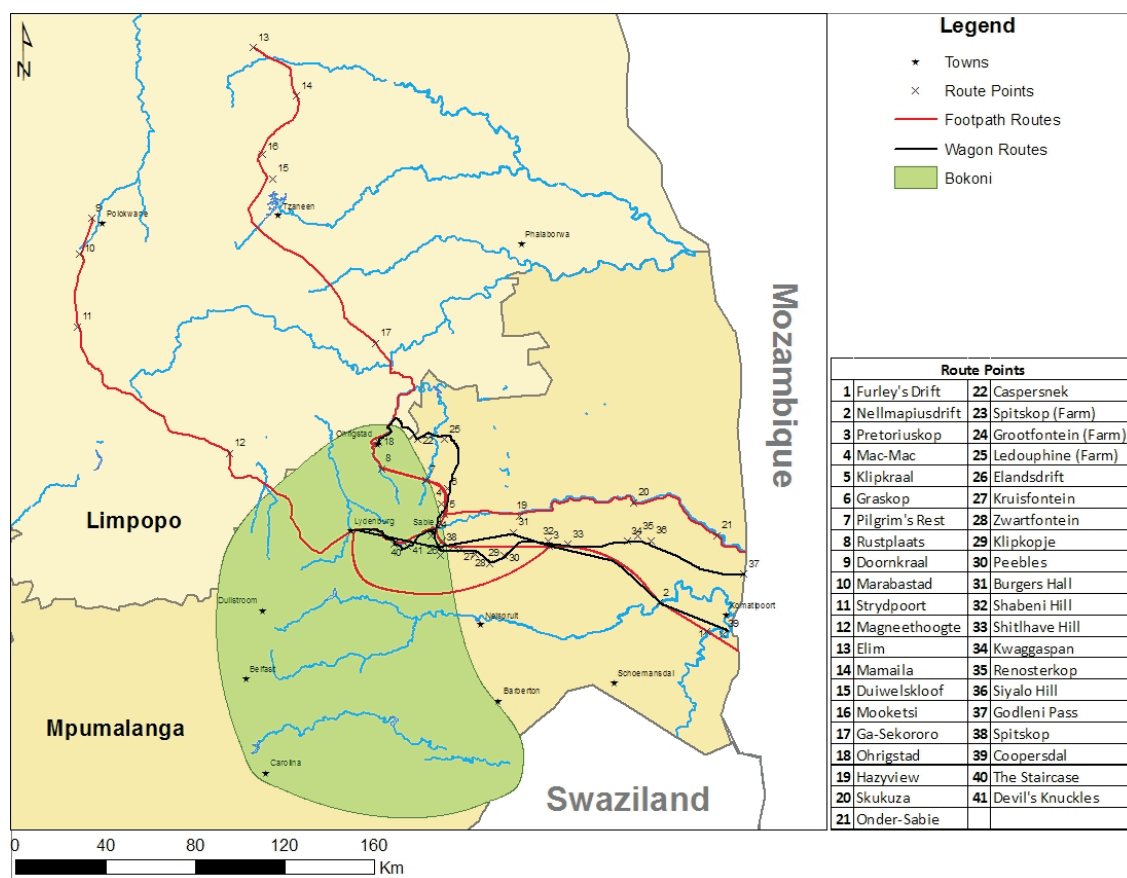
Both the footpath and wagon routes follow a roughly north-south direction until they reach Bokoni<sup>2</sup> (see map). The reconstructed trade routes focus on the northern parts of the research area with the exception of one indistinct route that makes a loop through the south-ern portion. There appears to be a higher density of footpaths in the north, but this might not reflect pre-colonial densities – the pattern could be the result of a concentration of Voortrekker routes in the area. Since some of these routes were based on earlier footpaths, the paths in this area would be better remembered. On the other hand, few Voortrekker routes crossed the Badfontein area, possibly because



*A stonewalled Bokoni homestead with ArchSoc group*

of insufficient knowledge about earlier footpaths south of Lydenburg.

The obvious reasons for following footpath routes were a proximity to water and the connection of areas that produced important trade commodities with the coast. Good examples are the footpaths from Rooiberg and Musina, which served the tin (Chirikure et al. 2007) and copper mines (Van Warmelo 1940) that were situated in otherwise non-strategic areas. The majority of routes, however, passed through Bokoni, from where they turned east to the coast. This suggests that the area played an important role in directing and controlling trade to the coast. Part of the



*Key wagon routes and trade footpaths to the coast in relation to Bokoni*

1. Some wagon and footpath trade routes were excluded from this study because only those closest to the study area were mapped. Many other wagon routes existed, but information about their exact locations could not be found.
2. The illustrated outline of the Bokoni region follows the extent of stonewalled sites. This is a rather conservative boundary, because it is very likely that political control, hunting grounds and grazing areas extended beyond the immediate vicinity of the stonewalled towns and homesteads.



reason for the area's importance relates to its topography and river system. Pre-colonial traders followed rivers since the need to carry water would reduce the amount of trade goods that could be transported (Coetzee 2009).

Bokoni is intersected by the Elands, Crocodile, Sabi and Komati rivers, which all join the Rio de Incomati, which flows into the Indian Ocean just north of Maputo. The Incomati was a trade highway in the 1800s (Eldgrede 1995:130) and it is likely that the subsidiary rivers extended this role. Bergh (1998) showed that the Komati River linked Barberton to Delagoa Bay and the Crocodile River linked the Lydenburg area to Delagoa Bay.

Coetzee (2009) initially plotted the location of Bokoni stonewalled sites along the Crocodile River. Mapping has since been extended to the whole of the Bokoni region and this has indicated that Bokoni site selection on a local scale was informed by agricultural and pastoralist concerns related to the presence of water sources, rather than being influenced by factors such as geology, vegetation or soil type. While the micro-settlement pattern suggests an intensive agro-pastoral focus, on a regional scale sites are generally located next to major river systems.

Intriguingly, gorges were more densely populated than open areas. At refuge sites, such as Khutwaneng, this might relate to security, but many other gorge-site villages do not seem to be security-related. Rather, they are clustered in strategic areas where trade routes cross through mountain ranges, e.g. Schoemanskloof and the gorge where the Crocodile River exits the Badfontein valley on the eastern side. It seems as if the settlements were exploiting this geographical advantage to control or access trade. Since the area is not particularly endowed with valuable or useful minerals, we suggest that the people who occupied the area acted as intermediaries in coastal trade.

The control of areas that had abundant resources, were strategically placed or served as trade corridors had its consequences. It could bring with it an increase in wealth or power, but could also result in increased conflict. It is likely that the control over trade influenced the rise and fall of the Bokoni. Initially, they settled in the area because of its strategic location, but the power this gave the Bokoni made the region attractive to other expanding polities and states, such as the Swazi and Pedi. The resulting conflict eventually resulted in the destruction of Bokoni in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Delius & Schoeman 2008).

After being weakened by successive attacks, Bokoni eventually fell under the control of the Pedi. Many people fled the area during the periods of violence and those who remained were incorporated into the Pedi state. The terraces and stonewalled sites fell into disuse, but the trade paths the people of Bokoni established continued to wind their way to the coast and were used by Pedi and then by Voortrekker traders.



*A central stonewalled road in Bokoni*

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## Life of Bone

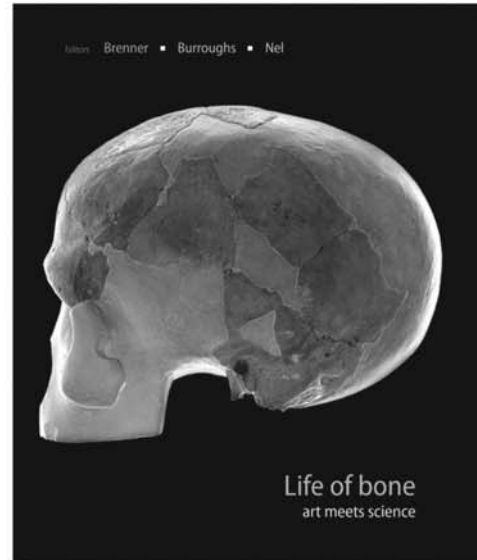
Art meets Science

Edited by Joni Brenner, Elizabeth Burroughs and Karel Nel

*Hominid fossils touch a responsive chord in people everywhere, who seem to have an inherent drive to know their beginnings. We want to know what the fossils have to say to us. There seems to be a magic in the fossilized bones that transcends time ....*

—Donald Johanson & Blake Edgar

*Life of Bone* brings into sharp relief, and interrogates, the abutting practices of the scientific and the artistic, practices which have co-existed since the beginning of our species. It is based on an exhibition, scheduled to open in May 2011 at the Origins Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand. This exhibition will display the original fossil skull of the Taung child hominid alongside artworks by Joni Brenner, Gerhard Marx and Karel Nel made specifically in response to these evolutionarily significant remains. This unique combination of paleoanthropological finds and art prompts a range of enquiries on the nature of both artistic and scientific disciplines, and encourages a dialogue between the very distant historic and the contemporary.



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### THE ARTISTS

**Joni Brenner**, whose work has been in the field of portraiture, turned a few years ago to working from a human skull that she has in her studio. Recently she has begun work on a series of images based on a cast of the Taung fossil, which has pushed her investigation in portraiture and what it is to be human back by a few millennia.

**Gerhard Marx** works with skulls, star maps and root systems. His work explores the ways in which these objects function in relation to a need for certainty: stars as coordinates and directional guides, the plant as a specimen in botany, and the skull as relic and as an aid in forensics and in the historical and scientific location of origins.

**Karel Nel** very often works with earth collected from specific regions or sites around the globe. He uses this matter to explore notions of deep time and the forensic information encoded within the formless substance, which for centuries has been a metaphor for birth and death, 'dust to dust'. Nel's work presents a distinctive and powerful combination of the conceptual and the physical.

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# THE CLASSIFICATION, AGE AND POSSIBLE ORIGINS OF BRITISH MILITARY BUTTONS FROM MAGORO HILL, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

Graham Reeks

In August of 2010 the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of South Africa held its annual field school for students studying archaeology. The school was held at Magoro Hill, a small conical hill that rises above the flat surrounding plain close to the Middle Letaba Dam in Limpopo Province (Fig. 1). According to oral and written accounts, Magoro Hill was a Venda stronghold from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the 1950s. During the excavations two well-preserved military buttons were recovered from two separate areas on the flanks of the hill. One of the buttons bears the United Kingdom Royal Coat of Arms and the other the distinctive crest of the Royal Artillery.



*Fig 1: Magoro Hill, Limpopo Province. The stars indicate the approximate positions of the areas where the buttons were excavated (photo by Francois Coetzee, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, UNISA)*

This article provides an analysis of the history and origins of the two buttons, including their classification, regiments of the British Army that may have used such buttons and their dates. The foremost question is why these buttons were buried in an archaeological horizon at Magoro Hill.

It is almost certain that the buttons originate from hostilities during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) and to establish this the movement of units of the British Army during the latter stages of the war were researched. Research was also carried out with respect to the British Army's campaign against Sekhukhune in 1879. Although this date is within the period of manufacture of the buttons, it is believed that it was too early for the buttons to have reached South

Africa for use on uniforms. According to one source on that war (Smith 1967), no Royal Artillery officers or lower ranks took part in that campaign.

The well-preserved state of the buttons made comparison to illustrations on various Internet sites and in books relatively easy. During the searches a number of sites were cross-referenced to determine the commonality of the data. Once the buttons had been identified and provisionally dated, further comparative searches were conducted at the National Military History Museum in Saxonwold, Johannesburg.

The back of the Royal Artillery button was stamped with the manufacturer's name, i.e. Smith & Wright – Birmingham. The only visible damage to the Royal Artillery button is that the loop at the back has been bent over at a slight angle. This may have occurred during use, apparently a common problem. The button with the Royal Coat of Arms did not have a back to it, so the identity of the manufacturer could not be established.

## Methodology for identification and dating

The range of buttons issued by the British military is very extensive. Between 1742 and 1914, over 5 000 different types of buttons were manufactured and issued. Even so, the task of identifying the emblems on the buttons was easier than expected, although in attempting to date the buttons a wide 'date window' was found for both cases. Internet searches proved quite good for identifying the buttons. They were Victorian in general age based on two facts. The larger of the buttons, which carries the Royal Coat of Arms, is shown with the Queen Victoria or St Edward's Crown. Buttons later than 1902 were issued with the King's Crown at the top of the Coat of Arms. The two crowns are visibly different even in very small representations. The image on Royal Artillery Regiment buttons changed in 1872 from a triple to single cannon. This gave an earliest date of 1873 for the Royal Artillery button.

## Methodology for determining the regiments that may have deposited the buttons

Following identification, the buttons were compared with literature in the library of the National War Museum. Both identifications were confirmed (Ripley 1971:14). It was then decided to attempt to identify the regiments responsible for depositing the buttons and when. According to the museum's military historian, Hamish Paterson, the buttons dated from the Anglo-

---

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Boer War. Various texts were studied for details of the actions of British Army units in the Magoro Hill area. The results, although circumstantial, do appear to provide one possible conclusion.

## Analysis results

### Royal Artillery button

This is a 22 mm diameter, compound brass button with a standard floating loop and gilt finish to the front face. The buttons were manufactured with two types of loop – fixed and floating. The fixed loop was more standard, but did not have the dimple below it. The floating loop with dimple (Fig. 2) was designed so that when used on double-breasted uniforms it would lie flat. The button is classified as a 'generic issue button' worn by all ranks. Officer buttons were generally of polished brass or gilt finish, with other ranks wearing unplated brass buttons. The excavated button appears to have had a gilt finish as seen in Fig. 2. From this it is tempting to assume that it was an officer's button, but comparisons with similar buttons of all ranks would need to be carried out to confirm this. The button has a 6 mm thick combined raised front and rear face. The button is hollow and made from two pieces crimped together on the rim. The front face bears the crest of the Royal Artillery Regiment, which consists of a single cannon surmounted with St Edward's or Queen Victoria's Crown.



Fig 2: Front and reverse faces of the Royal Artillery button (photos by Graham Reeks)

The manufacturer's name on the reverse – Smith & Wright – may narrow the date down, because the original firm was Smith, Kemp & Wright, based at 165 Brearley Street, Birmingham, England. In 1862 the name was changed to Smith & Wright, but in 1890 the word 'Limited' was added. This means that the button was manufactured between 1873 and 1890. Part of the decoration is a single row of dots outside of the manufacturer's name. The problem of using a button as a dating tool is that once it is issued and placed on the uniform it often stayed on the uniform for an extended period, even if, as in 1902, there was a change of design. So it is possible that an 1890 button could still have been on a uniform during the Anglo-Boer War.

### Royal Coat of Arms button

The button has a diameter of 24 mm and although it is also a compound button (two shells crimped together), the artefact found at Magoro Hill is only the front portion of the button. It is therefore impossible to determine its thickness or type of mounting. Although only part of motto is present on the button, the embossed face is in very good condition and it is clearly the United Kingdom Royal Coat of Arms. It is possible to read the royal motto of *Dieu et mon droit*, which translates to 'God and my right (shall me defend)'. The other readable portion is the motto on the belt or garter around the royal shield. The motto reads *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, translated as 'Let he who thinks ill there be shamed'.



Fig. 3: Front and reverse of the Royal Coat of Arms button (photos by Graham Reeks)

From 1871 until just after the First World War, the lower and non-commissioned ranks in the British Army wore 'general service' buttons, while officers wore regimental-pattern buttons. However, there were a number of exceptions and some regiments permitted NCOs to wear the regimental buttons as well. The officers' general service button was issued in two sizes. The large button at 22 mm to 25 mm in diameter was known as the 7/8" button to distinguish it from the medium-sized button of the same design, which was designated the 5/8" diameter button. The 7/8" button was used on greatcoats and service dress jackets. As dress jackets would not have been worn in the field it has to be assumed that the button came from a greatcoat.

This button therefore appears to be a multi-regimental button in use from 1871 to 1919, with the most likely period of use and deposition during the Anglo-Boer War.

## Deposition possibilities

### Unit of British Army on patrol

To work out how the two buttons could have been deposited in the 0-10 cm layer of soil at Magoro Hill, I investigated which, if any, regiments had been in the region during the Anglo-Boer War. A number of books were consulted at the National War Museum and discussions were held with a military historian. It would appear that there is good evidence for units of the British Army having been in the general vicinity of

Magoro Hill during the closing stages of the war.

Boer leader General Beyers operated in the northern Transvaal (Limpopo Province) from April 1901 to May 1902, leading a commando of several hundred men. From April 1901 the British forces, under the overall command of Lt-Col. HM Grenfell, consisted of two regiments of a corps called Kitchener's Fighting Scouts under the command of Lt-Cols JW Colenbrander and AE Wilson. Also present in Polokwane (Pietersburg) were other smaller units, one of which was a 5" gun detachment under the control of Col. FH Hall, Royal Artillery. Also present at Polokwane were two parties of 400 men each of Steinacker's Horse and the National Scouts.

The Steinaecker's Horse Special Squadron, which was established in November 1900, operated under

the command of Colenbrander as a separate unit from the main Steinaecker's Horse in the Lowveld (A van Vollenhoven, pers. comm. 2011). For most of 1901, Beyers played a 'cat and mouse' game with these British forces, with both sides winning skirmishes (Grant 1910:435-452).

In March 1902, Beyers surrounded a British garrison of 550 men in Fort Edward, which was about 18 km south of Makhado (Louis Trichardt). Beyers besieged the fort and a relief column was defeated at the battle of Vliegenpan. A larger force, under the command of Colenbrander, moved from the south and pushed Beyers eastwards. This reference to Beyers being pushed east is the only reference that could be found of British forces possibly having been in the vicinity of Magoro Hill. No maps were located to show that the British units moved that far east before chasing Beyers south to the Pylkop area. By April of 1902 Beyers was surrounded and by May 1902 the war was over (Grant 1910:435-452).

In Steinacker's Horse there was a trooper, John Hardie, who had served as a bombardier in the Royal Artillery for 13 years (Woolmore 2006:204). If Steinacker's Horse did in fact follow Beyers east from Fort Edward, it is possible that he may have been in a party that climbed Magoro Hill for lookout purposes. If Steinacker's Horse was at the hill it could account for the other button being found there as well. As regards the Royal Artillery, it would be impossible to take and mount a 5" field gun on the sides of the hill, which rules out this unit unless, of course, it had a spotter on the hill and the gun was mounted on the plain. Of the other units at Fort Edward, i.e. the Bushveldt Carabineers and the Pietersburg Light Horse, none of the soldiers had served with the Royal Artillery (Woolmore 2002).

### **Venda men returning to the Magoro Hill area**

If local Venda men were involved with units of the British Army, it is possible that some of the men acquired items of clothing from British soldiers, or just the buttons for use as trade items, tokens or as items of personal adornment. The possibility of such men losing the buttons on the flanks of the hill is a possibility.

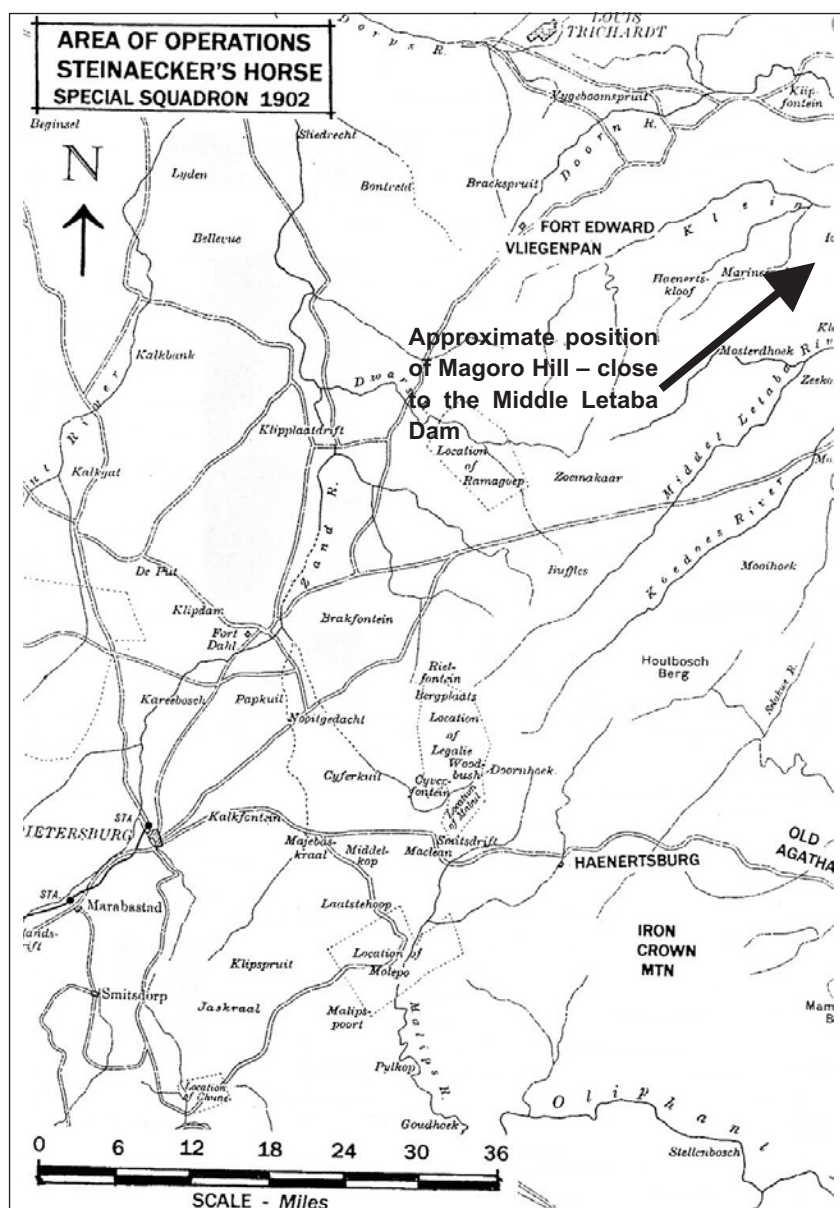


Fig. 4: Map showing the area of operations of Steinacker's Horse in 1902. Fort Edward was approximately 28 km from Magoro Hill (adapted from Woolmore 2006:117).

## Conclusion

The buttons have been identified and dated. Their origin in terms of regiments has been proposed with at least one button clearly coming from a soldier of the Royal Artillery. It is most likely that the story of how the British Army buttons were buried in the soil of Magoro Hill will never be solved. Steinacker's Horse often acted as a unit unto itself and not enough is known about its movements to be able to place them at Magoro Hill with any degree of certainty.

The alternative proposal of returning African men wearing clothing of British Army origin could be plausible if only one button was found, but the possibility of two different regimental buttons being found spatially so close together from such a scenario seems very unlikely.

## Author's note


Throughout the article mention is made of the Anglo-Boer War. Although some people may prefer the use of the synonymous term 'The South African War', I believe that as the buttons are of British origin, the use of the name Anglo-Boer War is more appropriate.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Anton C van Vollenhoven for his comments on the draft and information regarding Steinaecker's Horse, and Professor Jan Boeyens for his comments and for raising the

Sekhukhune campaign as a possible source for the buttons. I would also like to thank Mr Hamish Paterson of the National War Museum who assisted with information on the buttons and the two books by Woolmore.

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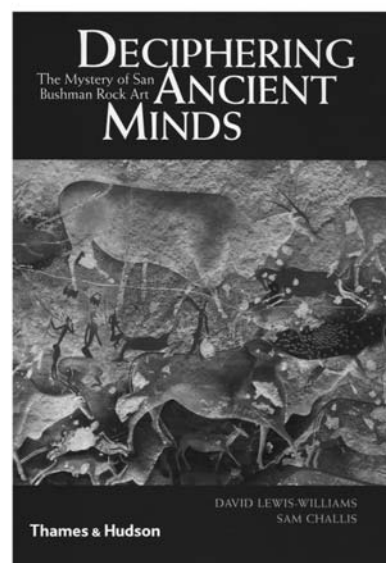
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## PROFESSOR REVIL MASON HONoured BY ARCHSOC

### Elected as a Honorary Life Member

Upon nomination by the Trans-Vaal Branch, the Council of the South African Archaeological Society elected Professor Revil Mason as an Honorary Life Member. The honour was bestowed on Rev Mason to recognise his valuable contribution to the understanding of the past in South Africa, his many achievements in archaeology and his past-presidency of the Society.

Professor Mason's interest in archaeology began in 1948 when he visited Makapansgat with the Archaeological Society. He continued to complete a bachelor of commerce degree with honours, but then decided to study archaeology at the University of Cape Town. In the early 1960s he initiated the Archaeological Research Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand and became its director in 1962, a position held by him until 1989. During this period he was appointed an associate professor and then professor in the Department of Archaeology at Wits.

In 1948 Rev Mason had found Stone Age artefacts and a 400-year-old furnace on Melville Koppies in Johannesburg. He later excavated this site, discovering a 50 000-year-old stone-tool factory and a 500 000-year-old Stone Age camp, which led to the proclamation of Melville Koppies as a national monument in 1963. Prof. Mason went on to find 14 more prehistoric iron furnaces in the Johannesburg suburbs of Lonehill, Panorama and Bruma, as well as 110 Late Iron Age (LSA) Sotho/Tswana villages in the Klipriviersberg Nature Reserve. He excavated many caves and sites in the region.

In 1953, at the age of 24, he was put in charge of excavation work at the important Makapansgat site in Limpopo province, continuing the work begun there by C van Riet Lowe, James Kitching and Raymond Dart. He completed the work at the Cave of Hearths in three seasons, uncovering four layers of occupation, including an early tool-making site from between 200 000 and 500 000 years ago. But some of the most outstanding of his many achievements continue to be his research on his excavations at Broederstroom, where he found pottery fragments dating back to AD 460, and at LSA settlements of Olifantspoort.

His initial major research contributions were reflected in his book, *Prehistory of the Transvaal: a record of human activity*, which still retains its value today as a

reference work. In 1987 he published *Origins of the African people of the Johannesburg area*. Other publications include *Cave of Hearths, Makapansgat, Transvaal; Other stone age stuff – Kruger Mogale Cave in Magaliesberg; and Kruger's Cave, Magalies-*



*Revil Mason at a younger age showing his dedication and commitment to black education, at a time when this was hardly common*

*berg, Transvaal*. He contributed to Harold Pager's book on the rock art of the Brandberg in Namibia.

Professor Phillip Tobias has commented on Revil Mason as follows: '[He] was brilliant, creative, unpredictable, sometimes difficult, humorous, an indefatigable field archaeologist who excavated more sites in mainly the old Transvaal province than any other person. His originality stands out in my memory. For instance, he was the first pre-historian in South Africa, possibly in Africa, to use statistical methods in analysing artefacts.' Dr Mason will also be remembered for his farsightedness in directions such as the social and philosophical aspects of archaeology.

Reinoud Boers, chairman of the Trans-Vaal Branch, handed over the Honorary Life Membership certificate to Professor Mason at the branch's monthly lecture meeting in April. Rev Masson subsequently addressed the members on an LSA hunting/ambush site discovered by him in Midrand.



## Sex, spirits and society (from page 3)

represented powerful shamans who controlled the painted space during times of social and political instability in Nomansland. This could explain why these LH-SDF images were painted physically larger than the other images.

## Conclusion

It is my contention that the LH-SDF at RSA MEL8 represents a powerful shaman controlling the site, more specifically a game-controlling shaman. The ethnographic references I have discussed briefly and certain visual features at RSA MEL8 lead me to argue that the LH-SDF could be associated with hunting and game controlling. Examples of these visual features are the exaggerated hunting bag with the unrealistic number of bows and arrows, numerous hunting and gathering bags associated with the figure and the layout of the panel – the LH-SDF is on the left side, human figures mostly in the middle and animals on the right). There is a visual uniformity about most of the images and very little dense superimposition. The images could have been produced contemporaneously and the panel layout could have been strategic.

The San associated fat with potency and thus the fatter human figures and the large eland may be very potent. The exaggerated phallic representations were possibly connected to an association between sexual secretions and potency, and could depict shamans in the process of beginning to utilise the potency they had acquired, or the potency being retained by them. The thinner figures and the thin red lines could depict shamans who have already utilised their potency or are in the process of transferring it. The sexed images and varied body shapes could also depict metaphorical characteristics related to fat, sexual and bodily secretions, potency and power. This does not imply that the figures are inter-sexed; rather, the motivation behind the sexing of these figures is linked to depicting the utilisation of potency.

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Theories put forward by early social anthropologists suggested that prehistoric peoples had primitive mentalities, without developed or logical thought-patterns, reliant on myths for their belief systems. In this new study of the San and their rock art, David Lewis-Williams and his co-author, Sam Challis, avoid falling into that trap. In a masterful study that has parallels with Champollion deciphering the Rosetta Stone in 1822, they provide written and visual evidence to prove that the San were capable of sophisticated thought-patterns and that they imbued their paintings and engravings with messages, metaphors, religious meanings and experiences. Lewis-Williams and Challis reveal how analysis of the rock paintings and engravings can be made to yield vital insights into San beliefs and ways of thought. This is possible because we possess verbatim transcriptions, made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of interviews with San people who gave interpretations of copies of the art of their people. The authors are therefore able to move back and forth between the rock art and the San texts, teasing out the subtle meanings behind both.

Ultimately, Lewis-Williams and Challis pose the straightforward question: are pre-historic ways of thinking fundamentally different from modern ways? The conclusion has to be no, and although this discovery is not necessarily a blueprint for all pre-historic thought, the authors brilliantly assert how advanced the San bushmen were in thought and deed, probably 20 000 years ago at least, and that these primitive people were far from the simple, naïve types that previous generations had assumed. The book is elegantly written and is enhanced by beautiful reproductions of San rock art.

Among other publications, David Lewis-Williams is the author of *The Mind in the Cave*, *Inside the Neolithic Mind* and *Conceiving God*, all available from ArchFox Books.

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## SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY TRANS-VAAL BRANCH

### CALL FOR 2012 FUNDING PROPOSALS

The Trans-Vaal Branch of the South African Archaeological Society invites applications for funding by researchers and educators in the field of archaeology for the 2012 year. South African archaeological research projects and educational programmes that promote knowledge about and an understanding of archaeology will be considered. The deadline for applications is 31 August 2011.

Funding by the Trans-Vaal Branch may be split over more than one project and the branch committee's awards decision will be final.

#### Information to be included with applications

1. The archaeological research or education proposal, planned implementation schedule, total budget estimate, the grant amount applied for and the anticipated results or benefits.
2. If the project for which funding is requested forms part of a larger programme, information on how the project relates to the whole.
3. Resources and facilities available for implementing the project or programme.
4. A breakdown of the amount applied for into discrete expenditure categories to permit awards to be made for specific cost items.
5. Biographical details of the applicant(s), including academic qualifications, experience, professional affiliations and publications.
6. Two references attesting to the quality and success of previous archaeological or educational project work undertaken by the applicant(s).
7. Proposals for publication of research results.

Successful applicants will be required to provide six-monthly progress reports and a final project report. An article for *The Digging Stick* on the grant project may be requested on project completion.

Applications should be forwarded to the Secretary, Trans-Vaal Branch, South African Archaeological Society, PO Box 41050, Craighall, 2024, or by e-mail to [secretary@archaeology.org.za](mailto:secretary@archaeology.org.za). Enquiries: Reinoud Boers, fox@boers.org.za, tel. 011 803 2681.



### UAE Stone Age tools mark earlier date for human migration out of Africa

Just beyond a shallow, narrow sea lay an open topography of grassy savanna, populated by plentiful game and few predators. The watery barrier, probably not more than 5 km wide, would have been but a small obstacle for a group of modern humans accustomed to navigating African lakes with boats and rafts. But this short crossing, enabled by coincidental climate change, might have led the species – possibly for the first time – to leave Africa for Arabia.

After finding palaeolithic stone tools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a team of researchers now proposes that just such a pivotal journey across what is now the Red Sea occurred at least 125 000 years ago, about 75 000 years after *Homo sapiens* are thought to have evolved and tens of thousands of years earlier than they were thought to have. However, direct human fossil evidence for such an early and south-eastward migration is still lacking. The sand deposits around the stone tools suggest they have been buried 100 000 to 120 000 years. A Middle Stone Age residence in this area would suggest that humans reached the Arabian Peninsula not from the Nile Valley 119 000 to 81 000 years ago, or from the Mediterranean's shores 65 000 to 40 000 years ago – as previous evidence has suggested – but directly from the Horn of Africa.

Even with 'the confounding lack of diagnostic fossil evidence', says Chris Stringer, of the Natural History Museum in London, the new archaeological work 'provides important clues that early modern humans might have dispersed from Africa across Arabia, as far as the Strait of Hormuz, by 120 000 years ago'. 'The mechanisms of getting out of Africa should be understood in a different way,' said co-author of the new study Hans-Peter Uepermann of Tübingen University, Germany. 'Until now we thought of cultural developments leading to the opportunity of people to move out of Africa. Now we see, I think, that it was the environment that was the key.'

The site where the tools were found, Jebel Faya, is a collapsed rock shelter about 65 km from the coast of both the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Here were found three distinct layers of ancient tools. Assemblages A and B were similar, but assemblage C, the lowest, was radically different. The tools from the C group – dated to approximately 120 000 years ago – included denticulates, end-scrapers, foliates, hand axes and side-scrapers. As Stringer points out, 'the fact that artifacts in assemblage C at Jebel Faya do not resemble those associated with contemporaneous *Homo sapiens* [east of Egypt] signals yet more complexity in the exodus of modern humans from Africa.'

*Science*, 28 January 2011

### Oldest readable writing in Europe

Marks on a clay tablet fragment found in Greece are the oldest known decipherable text in Europe. The writing survives only because a trash heap caught fire some 3 500 years ago and hardened the sun-dried tablet. The tablet was created by a Greek-speaking Mycenaean scribe between 1450 and 1350 BC, which is earlier than expected. So far, excavations at Iklaina have yielded evidence of an early Mycenaean palace, giant terrace walls, murals and a surprisingly advanced drainage system. The markings on the 25 mm by 40 mm fragment are early examples of a writing system known as Linear B. Used for a very ancient form of Greek, Linear B consisted of about 87 signs, each representing one syllable. The Mycenaeans appear to have used Linear B to record only economic matters of interest to the ruling elite. Fittingly, the markings on the front of the Iklaina tablet appear to form a verb that relates to manufacturing. The back lists names alongside numbers, probably a property list. Because these records tended to be saved for only a single fiscal year, the clay was not made to last as they were only dried in the sun.

While the tablet is an example of the earliest writing system in Europe, other writing is much older.

For example, writings found in China, Mesopotamia, and Egypt are thought to date as far back as 3 000 BC. Linear B itself is thought to have descended from an older, still undeciphered writing system known as Linear A, which archaeologists think is related to the hieroglyph system used by the Egyptians. It would be some 400 to 600 years before the written word was demystified in Greece, as the ancient Greek alphabet overtook Linear B and eventually evolved into the 26 letters.

*National Geographic News*, 30 March 2011

### Moby Dick ship found

US marine archaeologists have found the sunken whaling ship belonging to the captain who inspired Herman Melville's classic 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *Moby Dick*. The remains of the vessel, the *Two Brothers*, was found in shallow waters 965 km north-west of Honolulu, Hawaii. Captain George Pollard was the skipper when the ship hit a coral reef and sank in 1823. His previous ship, the *Essex*, had been rammed by a whale and also sank, providing the narrative for the book. The sinking of the *Two Brothers* was relatively uneventful compared with the *Essex*'s run-in with the sperm whale in 1821. After the *Essex* sank, Capt Pollard and his crew drifted at sea without food and water for three months and even resorted to cannibalism before they were rescued. Pollard gave up whaling and became a night watchman in Nantucket, Massachusetts.



# THE JOINT PANAFRICAN AND SAFA CONGRESS HELD IN DAKAR IN NOVEMBER 2010

Gavin Whitelaw

At the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA) conference held in Calgary in 2006, conference participants accepted the need to rationalise the two major conferences on African archaeology, those of SAfA and the Panafrican Archaeological Association for Prehistory and Related Studies (PAA). SAfA is held every two years, alternating between North America and Europe. The PAA is held every four to six years in Africa. The conference recommended that SAfA conferences continued to be held every two years, but that they alternate between North America, Europe and Africa, with the PAA hosting the African edition. The PAA's 2010 congress held in Dakar, Senegal, was thus the first joint meeting of the two organisations. It was also the second time that the Panafrican was held in Dakar, the first being in 1967, when several South Africans attended, including Tim Maggs, who was there again in 2010 (see his impressions in the next article).

The conference, including the excursions, was scheduled for 1 to 7 November. Day 1 began with a somewhat chaotic registration that took several hours. In the afternoon, delegates were bussed to the ferry dock for a trip to Gorée Island, infamous because of its connection to the Atlantic slave trade. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The buildings are rather lovely, coloured with soft peeling dusky pinks and yellow ochre, coupled with brick-red tiled roofs, raw stonework and concrete, all beautifully picked out by the late afternoon light. Baobabs provide dense shade in courtyards and at the intersections of narrow lanes. This architectural softness contrasts sharply with the decayed military menace of the stone and concrete fort near the harbour. The fort neatly fits the island's infamy, but ironically Gorée was never a major export site for slaves. Only a few hundred of them were shipped from Gorée each year and as the slave trade declined in the 1770s and 1780s, the island became more important as a transit port for regular exports.

The island has a significant South African connection. During a visit there early in 1987, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert and Breyten Breytenbach began planning a meeting between the ANC and influential South Africans. Dakar seemed to be a suitable venue for the meeting, which took place from 9 to 12 June 1987. Van Zyl Slabbert brought with him some 60 people, including writers, business people, academics, actors and artists. When the discussions were over, the par-

ticipants spent an emotional day on Gorée Island. Today, in the courtyard of the Soros House of the Gorée Institute, founded by Van Zyl Slabbert in June 1992, there is the plaque to him that seems new and was probably erected in his honour after his death on 14 May 2010. Breyten Breytenbach is the institute's current director. George Soros was a key funder of the 1987 meeting.

It was an unusual way to start a conference. Mini-excursions such as the one to Gorée are generally scheduled for the middle of conferences, when they provide a welcome break from the talk and physical inactivity. But the outing did have one major advantage in that we could early on re-establish relationships with people we had not seen for a couple of years.

The second day started with the formal welcome, after which Merrick Posnansky gave his keynote address in which he drew on lessons learnt during his long life in African archaeology. British-born Merrick arrived in Kenya in 1956 for a two-year stay and remained in Africa for more than 20 years, working in Kenya, Uganda and Ghana especially. He is now an emeritus professor at UCLA and recently published an autobiography, *Africa and archaeology: empowering an expatriate life*. Merrick was one of three or four archaeologists at the meeting who had attended the 1967 Panafrican in Dakar.



The conference included some of the best sessions and papers I have ever been to. Two sessions stood out for me. 'From stone to metal' included a set of stunning papers from a Frankfurt team on the Nok culture and the agricultural communities that preceded it in Nigeria. In the same session Tom Huffman (Wits) used archaeological data to reconstruct a sequence of severe droughts in southern Africa during the last 2 000 years. Jim Denbow (Texas)

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described his work in the Congo and the challenges he faces in trying to save archaeological sites there from destruction by international developers.

The second excellent session, 'Heritage management in Africa', included papers by Aron Mazel (Newcastle) and Mélanie Duval-Massaloux (Wits/Savoie) on Drakensberg rock art, as well as a set of three papers from Lesotho, read by Moleboheng Mohapi (Roma) and Charlie Arthur (Oxford). The delightful and very funny Didier Bouakaze-Khan (University College, London) rounded off with a description of work in the Tsodilo Hills of Botswana.

There were excellent papers in other sessions too, which included those by Thembi Russell (Wits) on a megalithic rock art site in Kenya, Catherine Namono (Wits) on pygmy rock art, Paul Lane (York) on historical ecologies, Paul Hubbard (Zimbabwe) on Ndebele granaries and Per Ditlef Fredriksen (Oslo) on Tswana archaeology.

My own paper was scheduled for the last slot, just before lunch on Day 4. In the break before my session I plugged my flash stick into the conference room computer, whereupon a virus attacked it and trashed my presentation. Fortunately, I managed to call a friend, who recovered the trashed version. Unfortunately, I had to do this during the session and so missed what were so obviously fascinating papers from Djibouti and Sudan. My paper followed one by Tim Maggs (UCT) on African agricultural systems.

At the PAA and SAfA business meetings we decided to schedule a SAfA conference in Toronto in 2012 and a PAA congress in Johannesburg in either 2015 or 2016. So that was it: two days of conference with much excellent content. But it was a great shame that it was not differently organised. It would have been far preferable to spread the actual sessions over four days and so reduce the number of parallel sessions, which numbered eight. This arrangement would have allowed us to see, hear and learn far more, not only in our own fields of research, but in unrelated fields.

On Day 5 we set off on our chosen excursions. Mine took me northwards to the historic town of St Louis, another World Heritage Site, which had been a major slaving port. It is filled with quite extraordinarily beautiful colonial buildings set on an island in the Senegal River estuary, reached by a remarkable iron bridge designed by Gustave Eiffel. The bridge is currently being renovated, though perhaps 'replaced-in-the-same-style' is a better term. The beauty of St Louis is surpassed only by the beauty of Senegalese women who, our guide told us, were a powerful political and entrepreneurial force in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the so-called *signares*. Evidently visitors to St Louis frequently stumbled from looking upwards at the women on balconies of stately buildings (some of this might have been lost in translation!).



We also travelled north to yet another World Heritage Site, this time a natural one: Djoudj Park, best known for its extraordinary water-bird life. We boated through a flooded landscape that I imagine is somewhat similar to the Okavango Swamps. The finale came as we rounded an island to see a pelican breeding colony with thousands of birds.

Attending the congress was well worthwhile. The Senegalese were gracious hosts, in particular the student helpers. Generally the Senegalese were welcoming and it is an altogether fascinating country.

## THE PANAFRICAN 1967 AND 2010: Some impressions

Tim Maggs

In November 2010, the Panafrican held its 13<sup>th</sup> congress at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar in Senegal. In 1967 the sixth congress of the Panafrican was also held at this venue and it seems that I was one of only three people who participated in both, the others being Merrick Posnansky, emeritus professor at UCLA, and John Sutton, a former director

of the British Institute of Eastern Africa. As a result, our ever vigilant editor has asked me to note my impressions of these events.

In 1967 Senegal was newly independent from France and was already applying sanctions against apartheid South Africa. South Africans would therefore normally not have been allowed to travel there, but we were given special permission thanks to the intervention of the then French ambassador in South Africa, who was

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*From the left, John Sutton, Merrick Posnansky and Tim Maggs, who were, as far as the conference was able to establish, the only participants at both the 1967 and the 2010 Panafrican congresses at Dakar (photo: Aron Mazel)*



a personal friend of Senegal's founding president, Leopold Senghor. It turned out that this was the last Panafrican that South Africans would attend until our transition to democracy.

Dakar had been an important centre in France's West African empire. In 1967 it retained a distinctly European feel, especially along the coast where both the university and our beachfront tourist hotel were situated. By contrast, in downtown Dakar many men and women were dressed in beautiful West African style cloth and clothing. The market was full of tie-dyed fabrics and flanked by tailor's shops where garments were assembled in a day with the addition of rich embroidery; I still have a shirt.

Today the town is more African in character; bustling streets with pavement traders. Buildings, even quite large ones in downtown Dakar, are not completed in a single episode, but seem to grow organically like trees. Once the ground floor is built people move in and work proceeds on the next floor, and so on upwards. Many buildings are thus topped by exposed steel and concrete beams that provide excellent roosts for the kites wheeling above the city.

Alas, despite my expectations and after much searching of markets we found no traditional Senegalese textiles. Some people still dress in a West African style, but globalisation has struck and the cloth is all machine made. As a last resort we found a small informal trading area beside the main railway station. This, the Malian Market, did have beautiful tie-dyed damask – but from Mali. This brought back memories of the 2001 Panafrican in Bamako, Mali, and the wealth of handmade textiles, silverware and other crafts in those markets.

Symbolic of the post-colonial changes in West Africa is the fate of the once prestigious railway line built by the French to link Dakar and Bamako, more than 1 000 km apart. We had seen the disused tracks and station at Bamako. The main station at Dakar has an even more impressive wedding-cake façade, but, viewed from the Malian Market, the rails are rusted and overgrown.

Back in 1967 I prepared two papers for the congress. It was my first international conference and at the time it seemed large with 152 active participants. Big names included Desmond Clark and Louis Leakey, but there were only 10 delegates from South Africa. The 2010 Panafrican was certainly a bigger affair, with over 300 names on the pre-circulated programme, although not all of these attended. There were 36 South African-based participants and many more who had studied and/or done research here, a welcome feature of our readmission to the international community.

Part of the reason for the large number was that, for the first time, the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA) combined its meeting with the Panafrican. This too was a welcome development as it brought researchers from the North, especially from North America, to Africa. Yet there is a certain irony in this situation. SAfA was established in North America, specifically for people working in African archaeology. As a result of pressure from European colleagues, SAfA has been alternating its biannual meetings between Europe and America in recent years, but 2010 was the first ever SAfA meeting on African soil. There is quite a substantial lobby that would like to return to America, but African voices were also raised and it seems that SAfA will again participate in a joint meeting at the next Panafrican. This will be at Wits, which is a first for South Africa. The nearest the Panafrican has been is Harare in 1995 and Gaborone in 2003. Heartiest congratulations to the Wits archaeologists who successfully bid for their venue.

Since its inception the Panafrican has always been a bilingual French and English conference. The French element is more noticeable at francophone West African venues, but over the years English has increasingly become the international lingua franca. It seems that today English-speakers of younger generations have even less skills in French. In 1967 this incipient tension focused around the definition of the word 'neolithic'. Whereas English speakers used it in the post-Gordon Childe sense to include agriculture, French speakers held to the original definition of

cultures with polished stone tools. One wag summed this up as the difference between francophones and anglo-saxophones. During a lengthy debate several speakers advised that the word be used only with caution, or preferably not at all in sub-Saharan Africa, so it is interesting to note current attempts to revive it.

The French/English tension persists today and can lead to awkward scenes when half the audience leaves the hall just as a French speaker starts to give a paper. Responding to this issue in 2010, several French presenters had prepared the visual part of their presentations in English, or in both languages. My paper came after several French ones and I felt obliged both to thank them and to apologise for the fact that my talk and illustrations were only in English. I am recommending to the organisers of future Pan-africans that speakers be firmly encouraged to pro-

vide adequate visual coverage of their topics in both English and French.

Characteristic of the three Panafricans I have attended in West Africa is the far greater emphasis on political and diplomatic protocol than we are used to at scientific conferences in southern Africa. In 1967, President Senghor even held a reception for the congress at his palace, at which I heard the entrancing music of the kora for the first time. In 2001, President Konaré of Mali, who is a qualified archaeologist, opened the proceedings. In 2010 the opening session was likewise addressed by several Senegalese dignitaries. Clearly such events as the Panafrican are highly regarded even beyond the academic community in these countries. Perhaps we have been selling ourselves short down south and could afford to punch a bit higher up the scales.



## ARCHAEOLOGY IN BRIEF

**8 000 year-old sun temple found in Bulgaria.** The oldest temple of the sun has been discovered near Vratsa, Bulgaria. It is aged at more than 8 000 years. This Bulgarian 'Stonehenge' is thus about 3 000 years older than its English counterpart. But unlike its English cousin, the Bulgarian horseshoe-shaped temple was not situated on the surface, but dug out from under tons of earth. According to archaeologists, prehistoric people used the celestial facility to calculate the seasons and to determine the best times for sowing and harvesting. The site was also used for rituals, offering gifts to the sun for fertility. Dozens of clay and stone disks were found in the area of the temple. The semantics of the disks symbolise the disk of the sun itself.

*The Sofia Echo, 15/12/2010*

**'Roman' roads may not be so Roman.** The long-held belief that the Romans introduced 'proper' roads to Britain has been thrown into doubt after the discovery of a thoroughfare engineered by Iron Age (IA) Britons. Archaeologists working in Shropshire have found a metalled and cambered road dated to the first century BC, around 100 years before the Roman invasion. The road, which is 1,5 m high and 6 m wide, was found to include brushwood, a deep clay foundation and cobbles taken from the river Severn. Studies of brushwood and the sediment found in the road indicate that the road was built in several phases, the latest of which was the century before the Roman invasion of AD 43. There are other, older-established paths, such as the Jurassic Way that links Oxfordshire and Lincolnshire, but they are not engineered, rather beaten down by use. There is also evidence of hard surfaces being laid within IA settlements. So far, 400 m of road have been found.

*The Guardian, 15/03/2011*

**Stone tool troves point to highland Neanderthals.** High in the Pindos Mountains of northern Greece archaeologists have made a surprising discovery: hundreds of prehistoric stone tools that may have been used by some of the last Neanderthals in Europe, at a time when hunter-gatherers were thought to have kept to much lower altitudes. The two Palaeolithic sites at an altitude of over 1 700 m date to between 50 000 and 35 000 years ago. The abundance of tools found by the University of Thessaloniki and Italian archaeologists indicates that the sites were continuously visited and revisited for hundreds or thousands of years.

*The Associated Press, 03/09/10*

**Ruins of wooden Great Wall discovered in China.** Archaeologists have identified dilapidated walls in north-east China to be the remains of a wooden Great Wall, breaking the stereotype that the Great Wall of China was only made of stone and earthen bricks. Some willow fences found in the mountainous areas of Liaoning Province, helped corroborate the existence of the 'Wooden Great Wall', which is mentioned in ancient history books. The fences were built upon the remains of the oak walls in the Qing Dynasty (AD 1636-1911) after the wooden structures corroded and collapsed. Historical records attributed the oak walls to the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644), when defensive walls were rebuilt from stone, earth, and wood in some parts. The Great Wall was originally built in the Warring States Period (475-206 BC) to defend China against northern nomadic tribes. But most of the standing walls, which extend nearly 9 000 km, were rebuilt in later dynasties, including Ming.

*Xinhuanet, 4/02/11*

# ARCHAEOLOGY IN AFRICA

## Study: Early humans began in southern Africa

Modern humans may have originated from southern Africa, an extensive genetic study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* suggests. Data shows that hunter-gatherer populations in the region had the greatest degree of genetic diversity, which is an indicator of longevity. It says that the region was probably the best location for the origin of modern humans, challenging the view that we came from eastern Africa.

'Africa is inferred to be the continent of origin for all modern human populations,' the international team of researchers write. 'But the details of human prehistory and evolution in Africa remain largely obscure owing to the complex histories of hundreds of distinct populations.' Co-author Brenna Henn from Stanford University, California, reached two main conclusions. 'One is that there is an enormous amount of diversity in African hunter-gatherer populations, even more diversity than there is in agriculturalist populations. These hunter/gatherer groups are highly structured and are fairly isolated from one another and probably retain a great deal of different genetic variations. The other main conclusion was that we looked at patterns of genetic diversity among 27 (present-day) African populations and we saw a decline of diversity that really starts in southern Africa and progresses as you move to northern Africa.'

She explained that the team's modelling was consistent with the serial founder effect. This refers to a loss of genetic variation when a new population is established by a very small number of individuals from the original, larger population. 'Populations in southern Africa have the highest genetic diversity of any population, which suggests that this might be the best location for (the origin) of modern humans.'

Chris Stringer, a palaeontologist at the Natural History Museum, London, said: 'The new paper... suggests that the genes of the Namibian and Khomani bushmen in southern Africa, Biaka pygmies in central Africa and the Sandawe in east Africa appear to be the most diverse, and by implication these are the most ancient populations of *Homo sapiens*.' Prof. Stringer said that he no longer thought that there was a single 'Garden of Eden' where we evolved. Instead, 'distinct populations in ancient Africa probably contributed to the genes and behaviours that make up modern humans.'

*BBC News, March 2011*

## Artefacts drive wedge between Egypt, Louvre

Zahi Hawass, Egypt's former chief archaeologist, took his campaign to recover the nation's lost treasures to a new level in October by cutting ties with the Louvre

over the return of four reliefs from the 3 200-year-old tomb of Tetaki near Luxor. Egypt immediately suspended the Louvre's excavation in the massive necropolis of Saqqara. It was the most aggressive effort yet in Hawass' campaign to reclaim what he says are antiquities stolen from the country, and his move appeared to have borne fruit almost immediately. Both the Louvre and France's Culture Ministry said they were ready to return the pieces.

Hawass has drawn up a list of high-profile items he wants back, including another piece held by the Louvre, the painted ceiling of the Dendera temple showing the Zodiac. At the top of his list are the bust of Nefertiti in Berlin's Egyptian Museum and the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum. He says 5 000 artefacts have been recovered since he became antiquities head in 2002. The process of repatriating cultural heritage is complicated by inadequate local and international laws and claims artefacts are acquired legally and in a transparent manner. *Sapa-AP, 08/10/10*

## Oldest human footprints with modern anatomy

About 1,5 million years ago, human ancestors walked upright with a spring in their step just as modern humans do today, suggests an analysis of ancient footprints found in northern Kenya. The prints are the oldest known to show modern foot anatomy. The discovery also helps round out the picture of a cooling and drying episode in Africa that compelled tree-dwelling human ancestors to venture into the open landscape for food, according to John Harris, a paleo-anthropologist at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The rare prints were found embedded in what was once muddy soil among tracks of ancient birds, lions, antelope, etc. The size and spacing of the footprints indicate they were made by people with bodies similar to modern humans. Given their age, the prints were most likely made by *Homo erectus*, the first human ancestor to sport long legs and short arms.

At the time *H. erectus* emerged, 1,5 to 1,7 million years ago, global climate was cooling and the African landscape was changing from tropical forest to open savannah. Food sources were becoming more dispersed. 'There was selection for creatures, including ourselves, that could walk over longer distances on the landscape between the patches of more productive food,' Harris said.

According to Daniel Lieberman, an anthropologist at Harvard University, other human ancestors such as the *Australopithecines* may also have been efficient walkers, but a more modern foot anatomy with spring-like arches and short toes is important for running, which may have contributed to the success of *H. erectus*. *Science & National Geographic News, 26/02/09*



## ARCHAEOLOGY IN AFRICA

### Could a rusty coin rewrite Chinese-African history?

A small pitted brass coin with a square hole is revolutionising understanding of early East African history. Kenyan and Chinese archaeologists found the 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese coin in Mambrui, a village just north of Malindi on Kenya's coast. In barely distinguishable relief, the inscription reads: 'Yongle Pongbao', the name of the reign that minted the coin between 1403 and 1424. 'These coins were carried only by envoys of the emperor, Chung Zu,' said Prof. Qin Dashu from Peking University's archaeology department. 'We know that smugglers would often take them and melt them down to make other brass implements, but it is more likely that this came here with someone who gave it as a gift from the emperor.' And that poses the question that has excited both historians and politicians: how did a coin from the early 1400s get to East Africa?

The answer seems to be with Zheng He, also known as Cheng Ho, a legendary Chinese admiral who is said to have led a vast fleet of between 200 and 300 ships across the Indian Ocean in 1418. Until recently, there have only been folk tales and insubstantial hints about Zheng He's voyage. Then, a few years ago, fishermen off Kenya's port of Lamu hauled up 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese vases in their nets. Chinese authorities also ran DNA tests on a number of villagers who claimed Chinese ancestry. The tests seemed to confirm what the villagers have always believed, that a ship from Zheng He's fleet sank in a storm and the surviving crew married locals.

Peking University organised an expedition to try to find conclusive evidence. It is spending \$3 million on the three-year project. Mambrui was chosen for the dig because ancient texts told of Zheng He's visit to the Sultan of Malindi, the most powerful coastal ruler of the time. But they also mentioned that Malindi was by a river mouth, something the present town of Malindi does not have, but that Mambrui does. The old cemetery in Mambrui also has a circular tomb-stone embedded with 400-year-old Chinese porcelain bowls.

The team first uncovered the remains of an iron smelter and iron slag, and then a stunning fragment of porcelain that Prof. Qin believes came from a famous kiln called Long Quan, which made porcelain exclusively for the royal family in the early Ming Dynasty. The jade-green shard appears to be from the base of a much larger bowl, with two small fish in relief, swimming below the glaze.

While the evidence is still not conclusive, it undermines Portuguese explorer Vasco Da Gama's claim to have been the first international trader to open up East Africa in 1499, launching more than 550 years of colonial domination by European maritime powers.

*Peter Greste, BBC, 18/10/10*

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