SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

GNEWS

KwaZulu-Natal Branch Newsletter
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c/o KwaZulu-Natal Museum
Private Bag 9070
Pietermaritzburg
3200

Forthcoming events

10 May, 18h30: Ashley Coutu on an ancient ivory trade in KwaZulu-Natal. KwaZulu-Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg.

11 June, 10h30: Chrissie Sievers on poison, plants and people in the past. In Durban, venue to be announced.

12–14 August: Weekend outing to the sites of the Zulu kings (KwaDukuza, Eshowe, Ulundi).

Past events

All of the summaries included here first appeared on the Facebook page of the KwaZulu-Natal Branch of the South African Archaeological Society (see https://www.facebook.com/ArchaeologicalSocietyKZN). Here I have made minor alterations for clarity to the summaries of Nick Conard's (Sibhudu) and Gregor Bader's (Umbeli Belli) talks.

New excavations at Umbeli Belli Shelter

Yesterday (4 February 2016) archaeologists from the KwaZulu-Natal Museum visited Umbeli Belli Shelter near Scottburgh (Figure 1). None of us had been there before, but we do have a collection of artefacts from the site in our archive. Charlie Cable excavated the site in 1979 and published the results in 1984 in a monograph based on his PhD thesis. Charlie was interested in the Later Stone Age levels. Beneath these he found deposits with Middle Stone Age artefacts.

Now Umbeli Belli is being re-excavated, this time by Nicholas Conard and Gregor Bader from the University of Tübingen in Germany. Nick works each year at Sibhudu

Figure 1. Excavations at Umbeli Belli Shelter. Photo by Gavin Whitelaw.

Cave inland of Tongaat, where Gregor has been part of his field team. Gregor has also spent time in the KwaZulu-Natal Museum doing research on old collections from Holley Shelter and Umbeli Belli. He is now Nick's PhD student, focusing on the variability in Middle Stone Age stone artefact assemblages in KwaZulu-Natal. He plans further excavations at Umbeli Belli, and intends to include the results in his PhD.

Gavin Whitelaw

'Allusions to agriculturist rituals in hunter-gatherer rock art?' A talk by Jeremy Hollmann, 9 February 2016

Last night Jeremy Hollmann gave a talk at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum on his recently published research on a rock art site in the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg. The site, called eMkhobeni Shelter, is situated in the amaNgwane community area near Bergville in the upper Thukela Basin. eMkhobeni has two components. In one part of the shelter the art is the same as the well-known, 'classic' hunter-gatherer or Bushman art of the Drakensberg. The second component, in another part of the shelter, contains art of a different kind. Jeremy focused on this second component.

Although the second component is painted in the delicate, fine-line style of the 'classic' art, it contains images that show that the artists were in close contact with their agriculturist neighbours. The artists must have produced their work sometime

Figure 2. Bull killing at eMkhobeni Shelter. Note the painting of a woman wearing an *isidwaba* near the upper right corner. Photo and digital editing by Jeremy Hollmann.

during the last 1600 years, but more likely within the last 700 years. Some background is necessary.

There is a long history of contact and interaction between hunter-gatherers and Iron Age agriculturists in the KwaZulu-Natal region, beginning some 1600 years ago when agriculturists first settled here. At first they lived in the coastal belt and in the low-lying bushveld in river valleys, but around 700 years ago people expanded out of the valleys into the upland grasslands, and so closer to Drakensberg range. They preferred areas that provided suitable pasture for their cattle herds. In the Thukela basin, reasonable pasture extends inland almost all the way to the mountains and so, consequently, did the agricultural expansion. In the 1600s and 1700s especially, the density of agriculturists increased in the Thukela basin grasslands and there is historical evidence for contact there between them and their hunter-gatherer neighbours. Now the paintings at eMkhobeni provide more evidence.

The paintings include images of men wearing what Jeremy interprets as agriculturist-style aprons (*amabheshu*), a woman wearing an *isidwaba*, the leather marriage skirt, and a black sheep, decorated with white and yellow dots. But most extraordinary is a painting of a man wielding a blood-stained axe, poised to strike again at the neck of a black bull, which already gushes with blood (Figure 2). These astonishing paintings are seamlessly integrated with images of wild animals – hartebeest and eland – and groups of people, in processions and apparently gathered for healing dances. Jeremy argues that the artists drew inspiration from the lives of their agriculturist neighbours, most notably from the annual first-fruits ceremony. For agriculturists, these profoundly important ceremonies celebrated the new harvest and reinforced chiefly control over production. They were most elaborated in the large kingdoms

– the Zulu *umkhosi* and Swazi *incwala*, for example – where they required weeks of preparation.

Jeremy believes that the eMkhobeni artists and the community to which they belonged surely understood the significance of the first-fruits ceremony for agriculturists. The paintings show that they gave it their own significance too. He argues that the painting of a 'signal moment' from the ceremony – the bull killing – shows that the artists deployed a ritual repertoire enriched with exotic elements and used it to expand their influence on their world.

Gavin Whitelaw

On the trail of Qing and Orpen

On 29 January 2016 a new exhibition opened at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg. The exhibition's title is *On the trail of Qing and Orpen*, the same as the title of a beautifully illustrated book that accompanies the exhibition. Its principal curators are Justine Wintjes (art historian), Jill Weintroub (historian) and John Wright (historian), who together with José de Prada-Samper (folklorist), Menán du Plessis (linguist) and Jeremy Hollmann (archaeologist) are also authors of the book. The book and the exhibition examine a relationship established in 1873 between Joseph Orpen, a colonial official, and Qing, a Bushman hunter and guide, in what is today Lesotho.

At the time Orpen was jointly responsible for a military venture in pursuit of the Hlubi chief Langalibalele kaMthimkhulu, who had retreated into the Maloti-Drakensberg with his followers after a dispute with the Natal colonial authorities over gun ownership. Orpen employed Qing as a guide. As it happens, Orpen seems to have had little interest in chasing Langalibalele. Instead he spent time with Qing, copying rock art in shelters such as Sehonghong and Melikane and, most importantly for us, recording what Qing told him about the paintings and Bushman mythology. Orpen published his version of Qing's stories in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* in 1874, alongside his copies of the art (Figure 3). His dense, 10-page article is today one of the three legs on which rock art interpretation stands. Modern anthropological research in Namibia and Botswana provides a second leg, while the oral information collected mainly by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd between 1870 and 1900 is the third.

The exhibition and book examine the historical context in which Orpen's article was created, posing and suggesting answers to numerous questions. What, for instance, inspired Orpen's interest in rock art and Bushman belief? It's not an interest we see in the rest of his writings, yet the *Cape Monthly Magazine* article reveals tremendous sensitivity to Qing, his circumstances and stories, and to the rock art. Orpen did, however, apply this same sensitivity elsewhere, arguing and writing strongly against historical and political accounts that ignored African histories and territorial claims.

Figure 3. Copies of rock art from various sites, including Sehonghong, by Joseph Orpen. Published 1874 in the Cape Monthly Magazine. Photo of the original by Justine Wintjes.

What do we know of Qing, and what did it mean to be a 'Bushman' in the 1870s in the high mountains? His history was tragic. He had "never seen a white man but in fighting". His own people had been recently killed, so he and his two wives (one, his brother's widow) had sought refuge in his work as a hunter for Nqasha, son of the Baphuthi chief Moorosi. Qing's appealing character nevertheless delighted Orpen and encouraged the conversations that have since contributed so much to archaeological research.

The exhibition contains items from the personal collections of the book's authors, and from several institutions, including the KwaZulu-Natal Museum. The museum's pieces include two copies of rock art made by Patricia Vinnicombe, one of which is of a painted scene that Orpen copied (Figure 4), and a hunting kit that was found in a rock shelter in the Drakensberg in 1926 (Figure 5). We at the museum are very pleased that the Standard Bank Gallery generously paid for the expert conservation of the hunting kit by conservator Juanita Petronio. Also of real interest is an attractive display of a copy of Orpen's handwritten text that he sent to the Cape Monthly Magazine, which differs at several points from the published version. A film by Muzi Msimanga showing the research team in Lesotho – on the trail of Qing and Orpen –

Figure 4. Patricia Vinnicombe's 1971 copy of the a painted scene from Sehonghong. On loan to the Standard Bank Gallery from the KwaZulu-Natal Museum. Compare with Orpen's version in the previous image. Vinnicombe's copy scanned by the South African Rock Art Digital Archive.

Figure 5. Hunting kit on display, with bow poised and arrows flying. On loan to the Standard Bank Gallery from the KwaZulu-Natal Museum. Photo by Gavin Whitelaw.

adds visual dynamism. The exhibition is open till December and is well worth visiting if you're in Johannesburg. If your interest extends to the book, its price is R300.

Qing's stories are more complex than the Gordian knot. Each strand teased out leads back to more entanglement with others. They display Qing's astonishing knowledge of his own belief system. Perhaps such knowledge was widely held in his community; perhaps he paid special attention to it because he was the son of a community leader; perhaps the tragedy of his life among strangers had prompted him to dwell upon and vividly retain his own heritage. Whatever the case, Qing and Orpen bequeathed us an archive of material that is endlessly fascinating.

Gavin Whitelaw

'Examining patterns of cultural change within the Middle Stone Age at Sibhudu Cave', a talk by Nicholas Conard, 8 March 2016

Last night Nicholas Conard gave a talk at the Durban Natural Science Museum Research Centre on his recent work at Sibhudu Cave. The cave is situated some 10 km inland of the coast in the Tongaat area. It gets its name from a local river name, which in turn comes from *isibhudu*, the red hare that was presumably once common in the area. Archaeological research at Sibhudu since 1998 shows that it contains a rich archive of the human past that dates back at least 80,000 years. Nick, who is based at Tübingen University in Germany, has worked at Sibhudu for the last six years (Figures 6–8).

Figure 6. The German field team excavating at Sibhudu.

Figure 7. Nick Conard and Mohsen Zeidi examining the archaeological layers at Sibhudu.

Most of the archaeological deposits in Sibhudu were laid down in the Middle Stone Age, a period that dates between 250,000 and 25,000 years ago. Nick began his talk by noting that there had once been little interest in the Middle Stone Age. Things changed in the 1980s and 1990s with the development of the 'Out of Africa' model of modern human origins. It is common knowledge that humans evolved in Africa and that, by 1.8 million years ago, had spread to Asia and Europe.

But not all these archaic humans gave rise to us. Only those in Africa did. We now know that all 7 billion of us on Earth today are descendants of a small group of people that lived in Africa around 100,000 years ago. (Note that up to 4 % of the DNA of people from Eurasia, Australiasia and the Americas derives from interbreeding with the Neanderthal lineage, which separated from the modern human lineage about 400,000 years ago and then spread into Asia and Europe.) Suddenly, the African Middle Stone Age looked more interesting, because it covers the time and place where and when modern modes of thought first emerged.

South Africa has a wonderful collection of Middle Stone Age sites, including Sibhudu, which is why this country has recently contributed so much to our understanding of the human past. In his talk Nick dealt mainly with stone-artefact

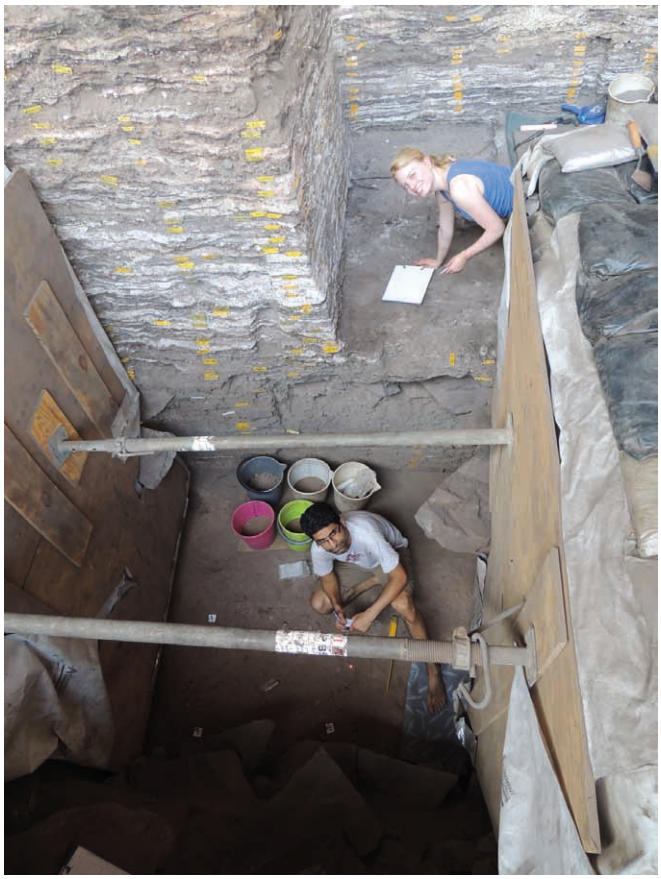

Figure 8. Mohsen Zeidi in the 'deep sounding' trench at Sibhudu – his favourite place.

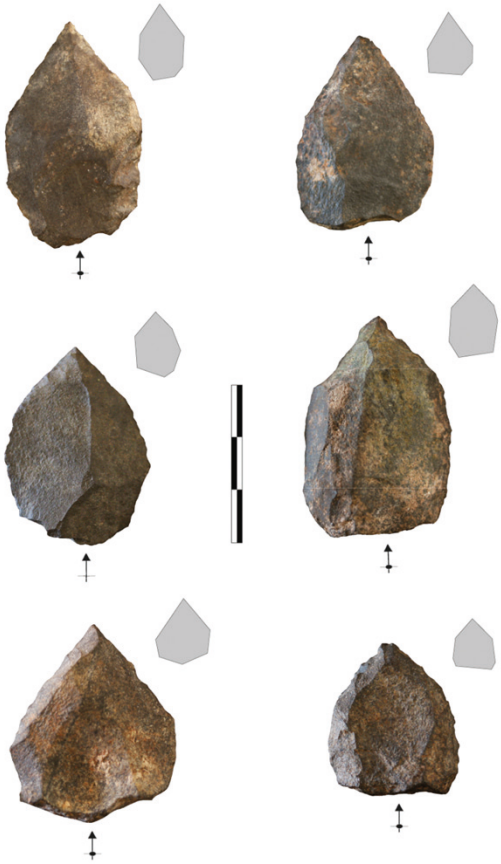

Figure 9. Tongati tools, c. 58,000 years old.

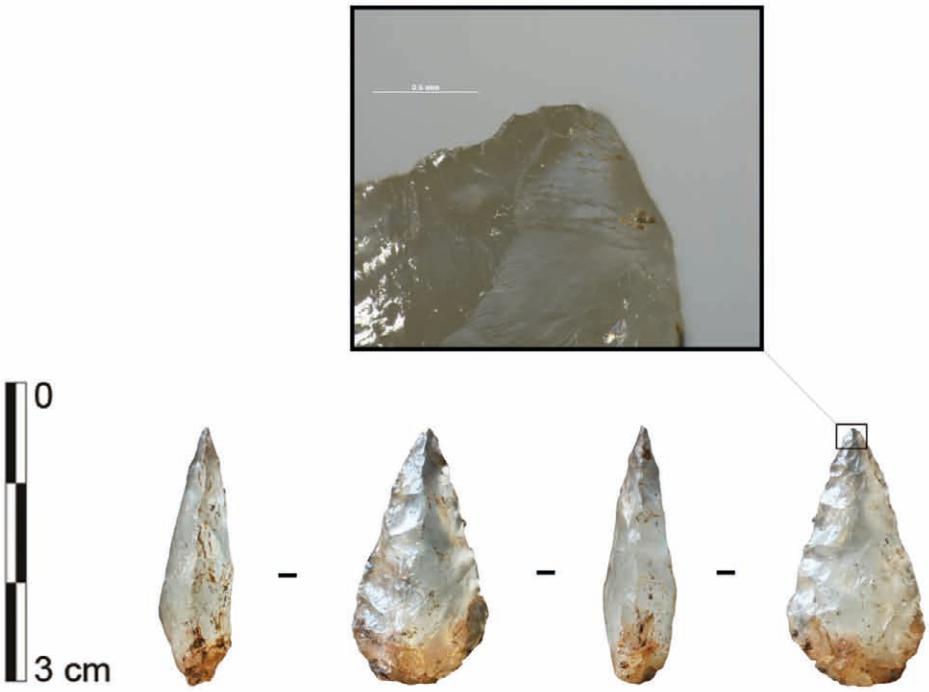

Figure 10. Various views of a quartz crystal bifacial point, with a close-up of the tip, c. 77,000 years old.

technology. He described a 'techo-functional' analysis used to define various tool types in layers of deposit dating to about 58,000 years ago. He calls one tool type a 'Tongati'; it has a triangular point and originally had a handle, held in place with glue (Figure 9). It seems to have been a kind of double-edged cutting tool, similar to a box-cutter. The second-most common tool from these layers is the 'Ndwedwe'.

From the deeper layers – the team is now digging in levels that might be 100,000 years old – Nick showed us some beautifully made bifacial stone points (Figure 10). Archaeologists traditionally associate these points with the Still Bay period, at about 77,000 years ago. But at Sibhudu they occur both in older layers and in younger layers. What is clear is that the more research we do, the more data we gather, the more we disrupt and overturn fondly held beliefs! Each layer excavated at Sibhudu and other Middle Stone Age sites brings us closer to a better understanding of life at a time when, somewhere in Africa, lived a small group of people who are parents of us all.

Gavin Whitelaw

Valerie Ward, 2 July 1935 – 10 March 2016

Valerie Ward died this morning at 7.45. She'd been suffering from cancer, diagnosed late in August last year. Val was an active member of the southern African archaeological community for about 40 years. Despite having only limited academic training in the discipline, Val achieved an extraordinary amount in research and collections management, first as a volunteer in the 1970s, then as an employee at the Natal Museum between 1980 and 1998, and then in her work after her retirement (Figure 11, 12). Even now, she has an article in production, which her co-author Justine Wintjes will take through to publication this year. Val's other published work starts with a 1979 book titled *Stone adzes of Hong Kong* (she lived there for five years in the 1970s) and through the next 30 years covers rock art, Stone Age, Iron Age and historical material in KwaZulu-Natal.

Val was a Life Member of the South African Archaeological Society and served many years on the Natal Branch committee as secretary and editor of the newsletter *Gnews*. In 1999 the Society awarded Val its President's Award, given for exceptional service to archaeology: "in the organisation and promotion of archaeology in South Africa, the extension archaeological knowledge to the public at large, and the recording and conservation of archaeological resources." For us in the Archaeology Department at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum, Val was our go-to person for questions around the history of archaeological research and collections here, even as recently as November last year. Some years ago we contracted her in her retirement to capture our entire site-record database of some 6000 sites in KwaZulu-Natal in electronic format. The database is now available on the national SAHRIS heritage system and is just one example of Val's remarkable contribution to our knowledge of the South African past. We'll miss her terribly.

Gavin Whitelaw

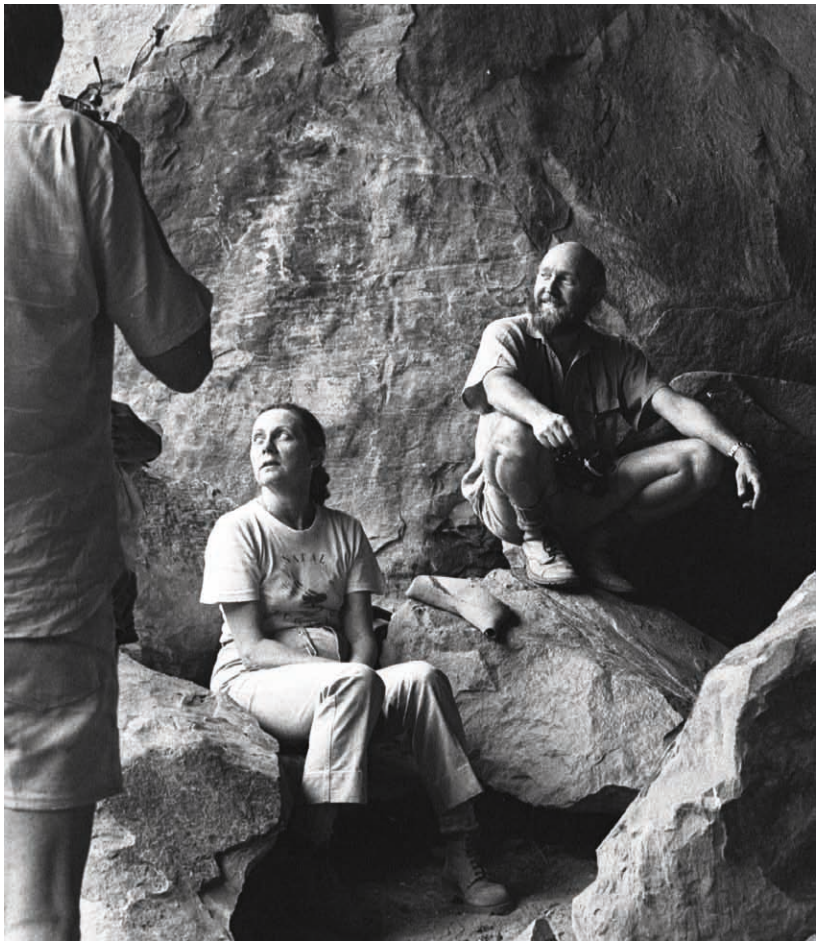

Figure 11. Val Ward and Tim Maggs at Poacher's Rock in the Drakensberg in 1981. Val undertook the first phase of a rock art documentation project in the Drakensberg in 1978–1979. Aron Mazel did the second phase in 1979–1981. Photo by Aron Mazel.

Figure 12. Val Ward 'at home' with the Archaeology Department staff at the Natal Museum in the early 1990s. From left to right: Gugu Mthethwa, Gavin Whitelaw, Aron Mazel, Val Ward, Tim Maggs. Unknown photographer.

‘The forgotten Stone Age of Umbeli Belli, KwaZulu-Natal’, a talk by Gregor Bader, 12 April 2016

Last night Gregor Bader gave a talk at the Durban Natural Science Museum Research Centre on his recent work at Umbeli Belli Shelter near Scottburgh. Gregor is a PhD student at Tübingen University in Germany. His supervisor Nick Conard leads the ongoing research at Sibhudu Cave near Tongaat (see *Gnews* online 2016/4). Gregor is investigating variability in Middle Stone Age tool kits, focusing on three sites in KwaZulu-Natal – Sibhudu, Holley Shelter and Umbeli Belli. Over the last couple of years he has re-analysed old collections in the KwaZulu-Natal Museum. This kind of research gives pleasure to us in the museum, because it shows that the work we do in conserving old collections is well worth while. What’s more, it adds value to those old collections.

This year Gregor and Nick excavated at Umbeli Belli, helped by a German and South African field crew. Umbeli Belli was first excavated in 1979 by Charlie Cable, then a PhD student at Cambridge University. Charlie’s interest was in the last 3500 years, but he found older artefacts in the deeper levels. These include Middle Stone Age tools that we have since learnt are about 35,000 years old. Gregor’s team relocated Charlie’s old trench, opened it and then extended it (Figures 13, 14). They recovered nearly 8000 finds of stone, bone, shell and plant material from three separate Later Stone Age layers. The team used a theodolite to plot the exact position of every artefact larger than 2 cm across. From these plots Gregor can create a virtual 3D model of his excavation. The material from the upper layers probably dates to the last 1200 years or so and includes pottery from African farmers. Beneath this, most

Figure 13. Umbeli Belli Shelter during excavation. Photo: Mudzunga Munzhedzi.

Figure 14. Excavation in progress, Umbeli Belli. Photo supplied by Gregor Bader.

of the material seems to belong to period that archaeologists call the Robberg, after Robberg peninsular at Plettenberg Bay (Figure 15).

The Robberg dates from 22,000 to 12,000 years ago, at the time when the last glacial period was coming to an end. The world was a very different place then, as it warmed up from the Last Glacial Maximum at 19,000 years ago. During the Last Glacial Maximum, at the beginning of the Robberg period, so much water was frozen into massively extended ice caps that the sea level was about 130 metres

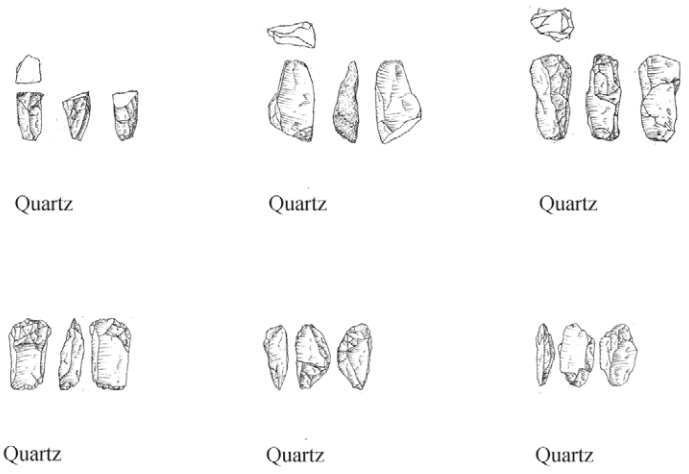

Figure 15. Tiny stone artefacts from Umbeli Belli. The illustration shows 'cores', pieces of stone scarred from the deliberate removal of several stone flakes. The sharp flakes might be used to make various tools. Illustration by Gregor Bader.

lower than it is today. This lower sea level did not make much difference to the general shape of the coastline of eastern southern Africa because of the steeply sloping undersea terrain, but the cold, dry climate meant that grassland dominated the region. Fortunately, Gregor's team found lots of plant remains in Umbeli Belli, so his work there might help us understand vegetation change through the gradual warming of the Robberg period.

Tiny stone bladelets less than 3 cm long and under 1 cm wide are the characteristic artefact of the Robberg period. At Umbeli Belli, people commonly made bladelets from quartz pebbles using a technique called bipolar knapping. They placed a pebble on a hard surface and struck it with a hammerstone from above. The impact force came from both directions (hence 'bipolar'), shattering the pebble and generating narrow bladelets. Bipolar knapping is a particularly economical way to produce stone components for cutting and piercing tools. People probably glued the bladelets onto handles and shafts to create knives and arrowheads. Most of the stone for the artefacts at Umbeli Belli came from the Mpambanyoni River that flows below the shelter. Gregor described the river as the 'life blood' of the shelter. Apart from stone, it must have attracted game animals, while plants growing along its banks surely sustained people camping in the shelter. In a challenging time, Umbeli Belli must have been a nurturing place (Figure 16).

Gavin Whitelaw

Figure 16. The excavation team at the end of fieldwork. At back from left: Gregor Bader (Tübingen), Sabrina Stempfle (Hamburg), Muzi Msimanga (independent consultant based in Johannesburg), Laura Bauer (Tübingen), Michelle Cloete (Wits). At front from left: Nicholas Conard (Tübingen), Mareike Brenner (Tübingen), Cherene de Bruyn (Pretoria). Photo supplied by Gregor Bader.

Archaeological fieldwork at Ntshekane

Last year archaeologists from the KwaZulu-Natal Museum and Wits University spent time in the field near Muden in KwaZulu-Natal. The Muden area is rich in archaeological heritage sites, which date from at least one million years ago to the recent past. Early Iron Age sites dating to between 1400 and 1000 years ago are perhaps the best-known part of this heritage. The 'Early Iron Age' is an archaeological name for the period in which African farmers first settled in southern Africa. They spoke languages closely related to modern Shona, Sotho, Zulu and Tsonga, and brought an entirely new way of life to the region – they cultivated crops (sorghum, millets, cucurbits, legumes), kept domestic animals (cattle, sheep and goats, dogs and chickens), and produced iron and copper.

Of these sites, the one we call Ntshekane has the greatest significance for a history of archaeological research in South Africa. Tim Maggs, who then worked at the museum, excavated at Ntshekane in 1973. In the same year he announced its early date in a note in the *South African Journal of Science*, alongside several other notes from archaeologists working on similar sites elsewhere. This set of notes convincingly demonstrated the long history of settlement by African farmers in South Africa. It corrected a widespread belief that this history was fairly short.

Ntshekane is still significant for what it can reveal about the past. The extensive erosion that exposed archaeological material to Tim Maggs in the 1970s continues to reveal new features worthy of research. These include deep pits filled with rubbish, open rubbish dumps or middens, the residues of cattle kraals, granary remains and metalworking areas. Because of what we've learnt since the 1970s, we can now ask new questions of this archaeological record. For this reason, we returned to Ntshekane to map newly exposed features and conduct minor excavations.

Figure 17. Mapping Ntshekane. Photo: Tom Huffman.

Figure 18. Potsherds at Ntshekane, probably dating to the AD 900s. Photo: Tom Huffman.

Our aim is try and make sense of the remains by applying what we now know about Early Iron Age homesteads. We have a good idea of how they were arranged – that is, where the residential zones lay in relation to the kraals, and the kinds of structures that each zone contained. We want to use this knowledge to bring order to the exposed features at Ntshekane by placing them in a meaningful relationship with one another. This approach can in turn result in a better understanding of Early Iron Age homesteads, if we find new relationships between features.

Figure 20. Livhuwani Mulaudzi and Gavin Whitelaw drawing archaeological stratigraphy. Photo: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.

Figure 21. The excavation team. From left: Carolyn Thorp, Tom Huffman, Muzi Msimanga, Livhuwani Mulaudzi, Bronwen van Doornum, Gavin Whitelaw, Mudzunga Munzhedzi. Photo: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.

The initial results of our work show that farmers lived on the site continuously during a 400-year period beginning about 1400 years ago. It seems that they built numerous small homesteads, each with a central cattle kraal of about 18 metres in diameter. Ntshekane therefore differs from a site we call KwaGandaganda in the uMngeni Valley. KwaGandaganda seems to have been a single large settlement with a cluster of cattle kraals at its centre, each about 22 to 25 metres across. It was probably the home of successive chiefs throughout its 400-year history. This difference between the two sites tells us something about political organization during Early Iron Age times.

We found several small blue and green glass beads at Ntshekane, which originally came from the Indian Ocean trade network. The beads show that people were connected to this distant trade from at least 1100 years ago, and possibly earlier. We'll learn more with further fieldwork.

Gavin Whitelaw