OCTOBER 2005 PROGRESS REPORT: EXCAVATION PERMITS (NO. 80/04/08/017/51 & 80/04/08/018/51)

I am currently conducting a doctoral research project concerned with the investigation of socio-economic variability in the Upper Karoo and southern Kalahari regions of the Northern Cape Province during the last two millennia. Here specific characteristics have been ascribed to so-called hunter and herder assemblages by Beaumont *et al.* (1995). In the literature, these assemblages are regarded as belonging to either the Swartkop or the Doornfontein Industry, with the former having been manufactured by hunters and the latter by herders (Beaumont & Vogel 1984; 1989; Beaumont & Morris 1990; Beaumont *et al.* 1995). This project aims to determine first whether the observed variation between these assemblages (see Beaumont *et al.* 1995) implies divergent socio-economies, and secondly to what extent they actually differ.

In September 2004 the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) issued me with permits no. 80/04/08/017/51 and 80/04/08/018/51 to undertake excavations at the cave site Vlermuisgat and at Peerboom Rock Shelter in the Carnarvon District, Northern Cape Province. This field research was part of the practical component of my project. The latter is being conducted in the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, under the supervision of Prof David Phillipson.

Field research at Vlermuisgat

Vlermuisgat (S31°01'21"; E22°18'48") measures approximately 6x12m while a small opening in the northwestern corner of the cave leads to a second, smaller chamber. The cave is situated in a south-facing sandstone cliff adjacent to a non-perennial river and overlooks two adjoining, square stone-walled kraals and a sheep dip that most probably date to the historical period. As mentioned in my application for an excavation permit, it was foreseen that this site has the potential to yield material remains comparable to other so-called Swartkop Industry assemblages (Beaumont *et al.* 1995). Predominantly hornfels blade flakes and cores which are very similar to other Swartkop assemblages occur mixed with flaked glass artefacts and porcelain sherds on the talus slope in front of the cave. Red, orange and white finger paintings occur on panels in and near the mouth of the cave. These paintings mostly consist of geometric stripes, crosses and dots, a style which Smith and Ouzman (2004) recently attributed to Khoekhoen herders, while a naturalistic depiction of what appears to be a feline also occurs near the site.

A small test excavation was conducted at Vlermuisgat from 24 April to 2 May 2005. Rudner and Rudner (1968) mentioned a human skeleton excavated near the mouth of Vlermuisgat. The current owner of the farm has no knowledge of such an excavation and it is not clear whether this excavation was clandestine or conducted by archaeologists, but the possibility that the deposit inside the cave is disturbed was taken into account when the grid was laid out for the April/May 2005 excavation of the site. A test pit was excavated near the mouth of the cave to permit extending it across a dip which may be the result of the excavation referred to by Rudner and Rudner (1968). The reasoning behind this was to determine whether the deposit has been disturbed, to allow investigation of the extent of the disturbance, and to enable subsequent circumvention of this area.

A baseline with a true north- (with a 17° declination) south orientation was laid out from the mouth to the back of the cave. The datum point, which also acts as the southern end of the baseline, was fixed with a dropper and cement in the mouth of the cave. The opposite end of the baseline was similarly fixed. A test trench consisting of three 50 x 50cm squares (F3d, E3c & E3d) was excavated to bedrock which gradually slopes from east to west. The position of the test trench has been marked on a plan of the site. Square E3d lies on the baseline, 25cm north of the datum point. The deposit was not very deep, only reaching a maximum depth of 35cm, but a clear stratigraphy could be discerned and was followed as closely as possible down to bedrock. Little evidence of disturbance was observed. The excavation revealed several layers, two of which are essentially patches of compacted animal dung, interspersed by four clearly identifiable hearths and one ash and bone lens. Field notes of each layer's colour (with reference to the Munsell Soil Chart), compaction, texture, content and distinctive characteristics were kept. Soil samples were also taken of each layer. Horizontal drawings were made as the excavation progressed while noteworthy features were photographed. The northern and eastern profiles of the completed excavation were also drawn and photographed. All the excavated material was sieved on site and then sorted, bagged and clearly labelled. Due to time limitations and the uncertainty of whether excavation of another square would significantly increase the sample already obtained, only three 50 x 50cm squares were removed. After completion of the excavation, A4-sized plastic bags filled with back-fill were used to stabilise the four walls of the test trench. Black plastic sheeting was placed over the plastic bags and finally the remaining back-fill was used to cover the plastic. Large stones were placed along the narrow edge of the protruding sheeting. All stages of this process were photographed.

Field research at Peerboom

The test excavation at Vlermuisgat yielded a lithic sample of adequate size, large samples of charcoal for radiocarbon dating, and a well-preserved, identifiable faunal component. For this reason it has been decided that a similar excavation at Peerboom Rock Shelter currently falls outside the scope of this project.

Analysis of the Vlermuisgat assemblage

The Vlermuisgat assemblage includes a relatively small yet adequate sample of predominantly hornfels lithics, thin burnished ceramic fragments, substantial amounts of charcoal and ostrich eggshell (OES) fragments, and a small number of complete and incomplete OES beads. The lithic component retrieved from the test excavation has been subjected to typological and metric analyses; the results of which are currently being interpreted and written up. Preliminary results of the typological analysis of the lithic remains from Vlermuisgat show remarkably low numbers of cores. This observation may very well indicate that knapping activities took place at an alternate site or simply outside the cave. In comparison to other Swartkop assemblages, Vlermuisgat also yielded lower percentages of blades and bladelets while a general decrease of formal tools occurs from the lower to upper layers. These trends may be related to the increasing availability of alternative materials, such as glass, but further investigation will be ideal. One way of testing these tentative explanations would be by increasing the sample size through further excavations that are focussed on identifying spatiality both in and outside of the cave.

Ms Elizabeth Voigt, affiliated with the McGregor Museum, is currently undertaking the analysis of the faunal remains and her final report is expected before the end of 2005. The results of these analyses will be included in my forthcoming progress report, due in October 2006.

The Vlermuisgat assemblage is currently curated by the McGregor Museum, along with copies of field notes and other documentation relating to this project.

Radiocarbon dates for Vlermuisgat

The presence of flaked glass artefacts in an upper layer and ceramics throughout most of the deposit certainly suggests that the site was occupied during the last 2000 years, with the final occupation occurring after the advent of the colonial period. Three charcoal samples were submitted to the Quaternary Dating Unit (QUADRU), CSIR, for radiocarbon dating. The results

of these samples are also expected before the end of 2005 and will be communicated in due course.

Conclusion

Cave sites are relatively rare in the Upper Karoo region and, apart from the work of Garth Sampson and colleagues (e.g. Sampson *et al.* 1989; Sampson 1995; Voigt *et al.* 1995) in rock shelters in the Seacow River Valley to the east, research in the area is often based on evidence gathered from open-air sites (e.g. Beaumont *et al.* 1995). Thus as a cave site with relatively good preservation, Vlermuisgat, has much potential in terms of shedding light on the lifeways of hunter-gatherers during the final part of the LSA in this region. What is more, the site lies within an area that is ethno-historically known as having been inhabited by "Mountain or Berg Bushmen" (Deacon 1996:245). Interaction with other socio-economic groups, such as herding people, and eventually European farmers, and the impact of such interaction on hunter-gatherer archaeological signatures, are clearly only two of the issues that further research at Vlermuisgat may inform on. The test excavation at Vlermuisgat was conducted with very specific aims relating to the study of the Northern Cape Swartkop and Doornfontein Industries in mind, but it also revealed the potential value of formulating a future research program emphasising this site in particular.

The results and broader implications of the current research project will be set out in my dissertation which is due for submission in 2006. It is anticipated that these will lead to a better understanding of the degree of socio-economic variability in the research area as reflected by the archaeological record of the last 2000 years.

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