

RECOVERY OF A HUMAN BURIAL FROM THE FARM SOMNAAS: NAMAQUALAND

Prepared for

De Beers Namaqualand.

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Prepared by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The presence of a human burial in the section of a mining pit on the farm Somnaas¹ was reported to the De Beers Namaqualand environmental officer. Digital photographs sent to the Archaeology Contracts Office showed that apart from the skull (that was no longer *in situ* after having fallen out of the section), it appeared that the rest of the post-cranial skeleton was still preserved in its original position. The area of the burial was cordoned off to ensure that no further disturbance occurred. As diamond bearing gravel lay in the area below the burial, it was necessary to exhume the remains. This was undertaken by members of the Archaeology Contracts Office during the period 23rd–24th April 2001, under a permit issued by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (permit number 80/01/04/005/51). The remains will be stored at the Department of Human Biology, University of Cape Town under the accession number UCT579.

2. LOCATION

The location of the burial site (30°08.524'S, 17°12.273'E) close to the shore of a small, rocky bay, is shown in Figure 1. Characteristic Late Stone Age midden material was noticed in the vicinity. Although there is no direct link between the burial and that material, it is highly likely that the two are associated.

3. OBSERVATIONS

3.1 The burial

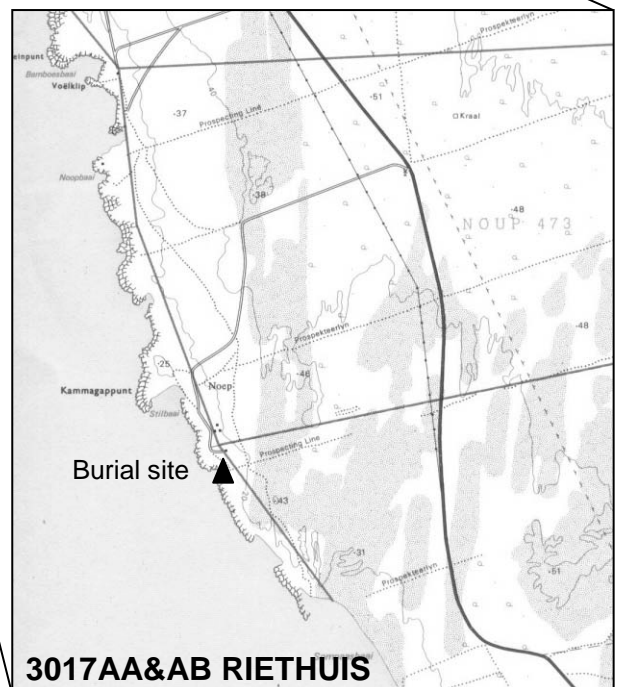
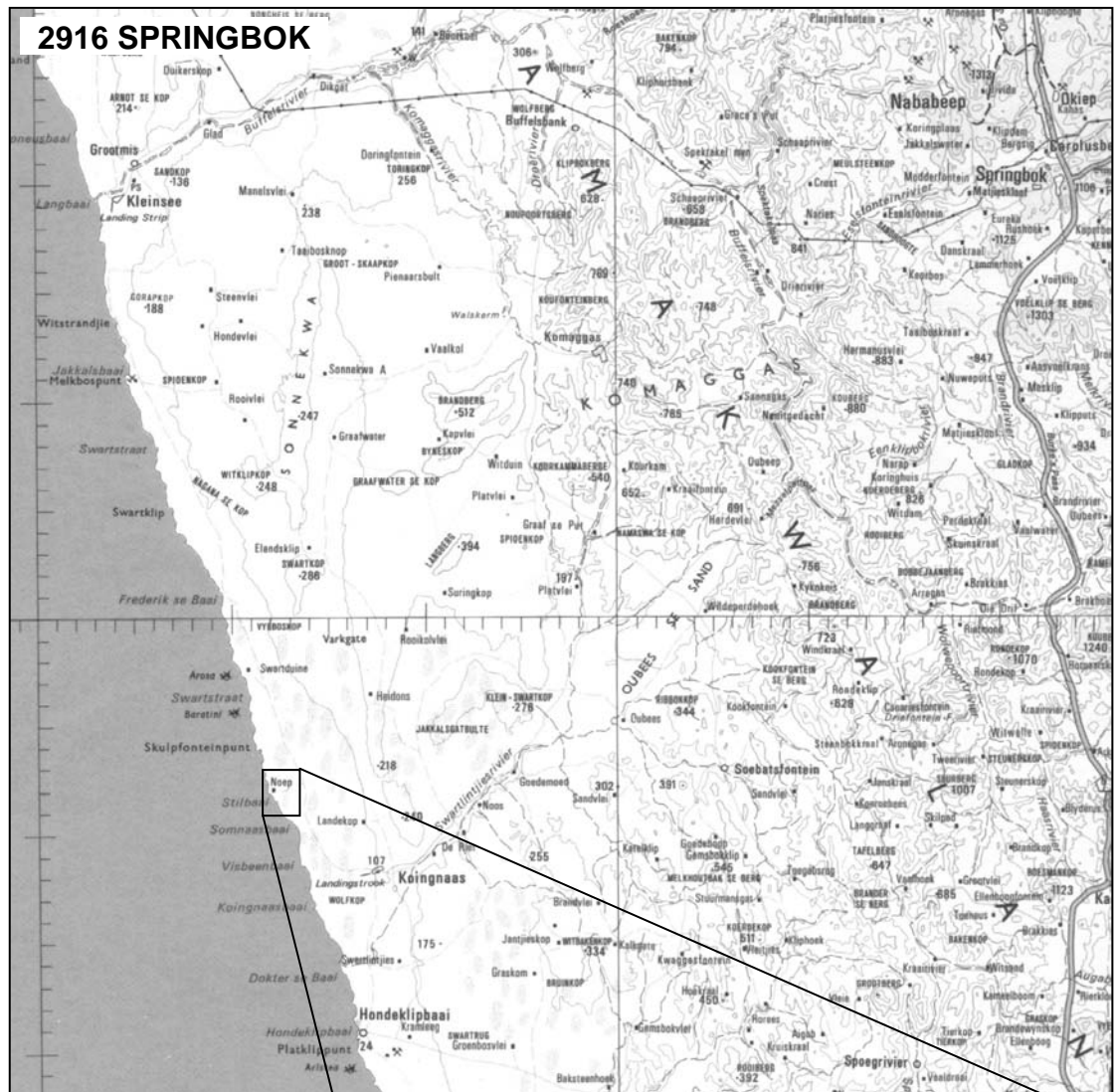
The burial consisted of an essentially complete, mostly articulated, adult human skeleton lying on its right side in a flexed position, head toward the south (Figure 2). Burial had taken place in amongst the rocks and the associated shell and soil matrix of the 3m Holocene boulder beach².

The upper part of the boulder beach had been disturbed by mining operations preventing us from determining the original surface from which the grave was dug but it is unlikely to have been substantially higher than the prevailing one. A burial shaft/pit with a depth of approximately 0.5 meters from the disturbed surface was immediately visible in section (Plate 1), containing visibly larger rocks than was the case in the section either to the left or to the right. The grave appeared to be more or less round and wider at the top than at the bottom. The base of the grave was large enough to place large rocks around the flexed (bent) body. Large rocks had also been placed on top of the body and one of these was identified as a lower grindstone (see Figure 2). Because of the movement of rocks near the surface, we cannot be certain of which were deliberately placed over the grave. Only the rocks immediately over the body are shown in Figure 2.

We had the impression that the upper part of the shaft may not originally have been filled with soil, and that what was removed during excavation of the burial, was a mixture of more recent soil and organic material that had filtered through the cavities between the rocks. The material lower down appeared to be raised beach matrix of a slightly different colour to the surrounding *in situ* raised beach matrix. Only the lower part of the shaft could be easily determined.

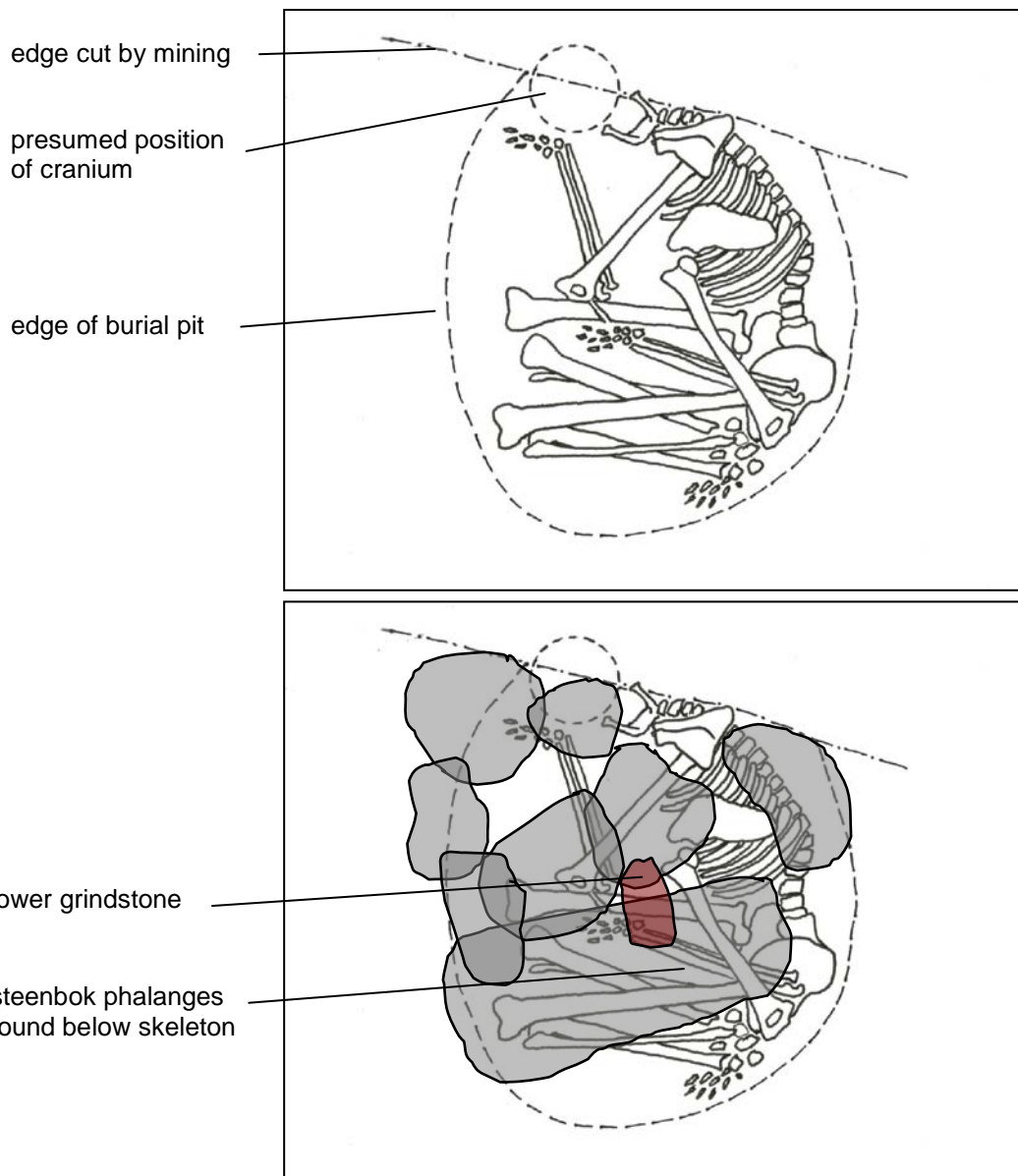
¹ Originally reported to be on the farm Noup. A GPS co-ordinate places the site on the farm Somnaas.

² The fact that burial took place amongst rocks is unusual in the sense that most burials of this type that are exhumed are usually buried in soft soil. This observation may of course be an indication that burials do occur in these locations but are less likely to be exposed by normal erosional processes.



1

Location of site



2

Details of burial

0 mm 500



Two of the cervical vertebrae belonging to this individual were recovered from different locations within the grave. In addition some bones of the right hand were also not recovered and together seem to indicate some that some post mortem disturbance of the shaft has occurred. Whilst the cranium was reported to have been disturbed by the current mining activities, it was noticed that while a portion of the cranium is stained dark brown by the soil, a portion of the frontal bones are bleached, and is evidence of prolonged exposure to the elements. I believe that this is evidence of disturbance, having occurred several years before. There was no surface indication that disturbance had occurred to the rest of the grave. The missing cervical vertebrae (C2 and C3), and some hand bones may have been lost at the time that the cranium was displaced, but that would not account for the displacement of the two of other cervical vertebrae (C6 and C7) to different locations and elevations in the grave shaft.

3.2 Anatomical description

The cranium (skull) had unfortunately fallen out of the section, breaking the face in the process. On first inspecting the site it was noticed however, that the mandible (lower jaw), a scapula (shoulder blade), the proximal end of a humerus (upper arm) and several ribs were partially exposed in the section. From these exposed bones, it was possible to determine the approximate position of the body in the grave and it was determined to be lying on its right side in a flexed position, head towards the south (see figure 2). We would presume that the face would have been angled toward the east.

3.2.1 Preservation

Preservation was generally very good. Portions of the skull that had been exposed had become brittle and broke easily when displaced, with most damage being present to the orbits. The vault is intact although some damage is present in the form of a small hole at the back, the result of a sharp stone being impressed into the bone (removed by us), and cracks on the right parietal eminence. The maxilla is virtually complete except for a small fragment missing from the region of the left M3. Scapulae and ribs were brittle and became damaged during removal. The right femur had been pressed down onto an underlying rock and had broken *post mortem*. The first cervical vertebra was brittle and broke on removal.

The inventory of the bones, Table 1, shows that an almost complete skeleton was present. Some of the smaller bones of the hands and feet are missing, often a factor of the size, and possibly because they are easily carried away by rodents or small carnivores. In other words this absence is not seen as abnormal. More disturbing is the fact that the seventh thoracic vertebra is missing. This was not found in the shaft fill that was sieved. Two missing cervical vertebrae (C2,C3) can be explained as the result of the disturbance of the skull. Missing bones of the right hand may be related to that disturbance as well as a result of the positioning of the right arm in the grave.

3.2.2 Sex and age

The skeleton is that of an adult (precise age not determined), and a cursory examination of the sciatic notch seems to indicate that it is a female. This needs to be confirmed by comprehensive metrical analyses.

	Part	n	Comment
Cranium		1/1	
Teeth: upper jaw		14/16	I1 (left) and M3 (left) lost <i>post mortem</i>
Mandible		1/1	
Teeth: lower jaw		16/16	
Vertebrae	cervical 1, 4-7	5/7	C2 and C3 lost <i>post mortem</i> . C6,C7 displaced
	thoracic 1-6, 8-12	11/12	T7 lost <i>post mortem</i>
	lumbar 1-5	5/5	
	sacrum 1-5	1/1	
	coccyx 1,2	1/1	
Ribs	Left	12/12	
	Right	12/12	
Sternum	Manubrium	1/1	
	Gladiolus	1/1	
Clavicle		2/2	
Scapula		2/2	
Humerus		2/2	
Ulna		2/2	
Radius		2/2	
Hand	Trapezium	2/2	
	Cuneiform	2/2	
	Unciform	1/2	left only
	Os Magnum	2/2	
	Scaphoid	1/2	left only
	Trapezoid	1/2	left only
	Semilunar	1/2	left only
	Pisiform	2/2	
	Metacarpal 1-5	5/5	
	Phalanges 1 st row	8/10	2 missing
	2 nd row	7/10	3 missing
	3 rd row	7/8	1 missing
Innominate		2/2	
Femur		2/2	right broken <i>post mortem</i>
Tibia		2/2	
Fibula		2/2	
Foot	Calcaneum	2/2	
	Astragalus	2/2	
	Cuboid	2/2	
	Navicular	2/2	
	Internal cuneiform	2/2	
	Middle cuneiform	2/2	
	External cuneiform	2/2	
	Metatarsals 1-5	5/5	
	Phalanges 1 st row	10/10	
	2 nd row	8/10	2 missing
	3 rd row	7/8	1 missing
Sesamoids		4	hand/foot?

Table 1: Inventory of skeletal parts (UCT579)

3.2.3 Morphology and Population affinity

This has not yet been determined by metrical analyses. The burial style would however strongly suggest Khoisan affinity.

3.2.4 Abnormalities

No major abnormalities are noticed. Moderate osteophytosis is present on the bodies of vertebrae. Tooth wear is fairly heavy but apart from a few chips, the teeth appear healthy with no visible evidence of caries.

Two observations are worth mentioning specifically:

- There are Wormian bones within the course of the lambdoid suture at the rear of the skull;
- There is a foramen in the left hand side of the mandible situated between the lower portion of the roots of the premolars and slightly above the mental foramen. This may be an indication that an extra tooth was present (Plate 2) (Becky Ackerman *pers com*).

3.2.5 Radiocarbon dating and isotopic analyses

Neither of these tests has been undertaken.

4. ASSOCIATED FINDINGS

A single lower grindstone was found immediately above the body in the center of the grave. It is not unusual to find grindstones in this context (for example Jerardino et al 1992). There was no evidence of any ochre on the grindstone.

The shaft fill was sieved and produced a variety of microfaunal material and reptilian bones and occasional fish remains. Crayfish mandibles are also found. The assumption is that most of these have been introduced to the shaft by natural means, possibly in some cases attracted by the decomposing human remains. Fragments of a tortoise carapace were also recovered of which a few three fragments show traces of having had their edges ground smooth. This may indicate that a carapace bowl was added to the grave as some form of grave offering.

The shaft fill contained quantities of marine shell. Most of this has been introduced by natural means as part of the raised beach and shows characteristic rounding and polishing. The shell is made up largely of small *Aulacomya ater* (ribbed mussel) with lesser amounts of *Patella* and whelk. Although three *Conus mozambicus* (cone) shells were recovered, only one of these shows evidence of human modification for use as a pendant.

The soil from below the left wrist and hand produced a number of small bones which could not have been present in the grave unless they had had been deliberately introduced. These bones consist of 6 terminal phalanges, 6 2nd phalanges and 3 proximal unfused epiphyses of the phalanges of an animal the size of a sub-adult steenbok (Plate 3). This is a very preliminary identification and needs to be confirmed by a faunal specialist. Robert Jacob Gordon in his "Notes on the Khoikhoi 1779-80" (Smith and Pheiffer 1992:10) refers to ritual slaughter and the attachment of parts of slaughtered animals to parts of the body. The steenbok is referred to in this section although it is not specifically stated whether bones are attached to the wrist. This aspect should be followed

up as a means of adding to our understanding of ritual behaviour amongst Khoisan society.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A preliminary analysis of the skeleton in addition to the style of interment indicate that the burial is very likely that of an adult Khoisan female. A number of small bones from the hoofs of a steenbok? were found below the left arm of the individual and may have originally been attached with string or sinew. Other artefactual material that was buried includes a tortoise carapace (upper shell) bowl and a *Conus* pendant.

6. ADDITIONAL HUMAN REMAINS

While on site, additional human material was observed in an excavation approximately 20 meters to the south. The bones consist of portions of a lower leg and portions of a foot. The location and light colour of the bones suggested that they came from below the Holocene beach. We were unable to locate any additional material. These isolated remains will also be handed over to the Department of Human Biology, University of Cape Town.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

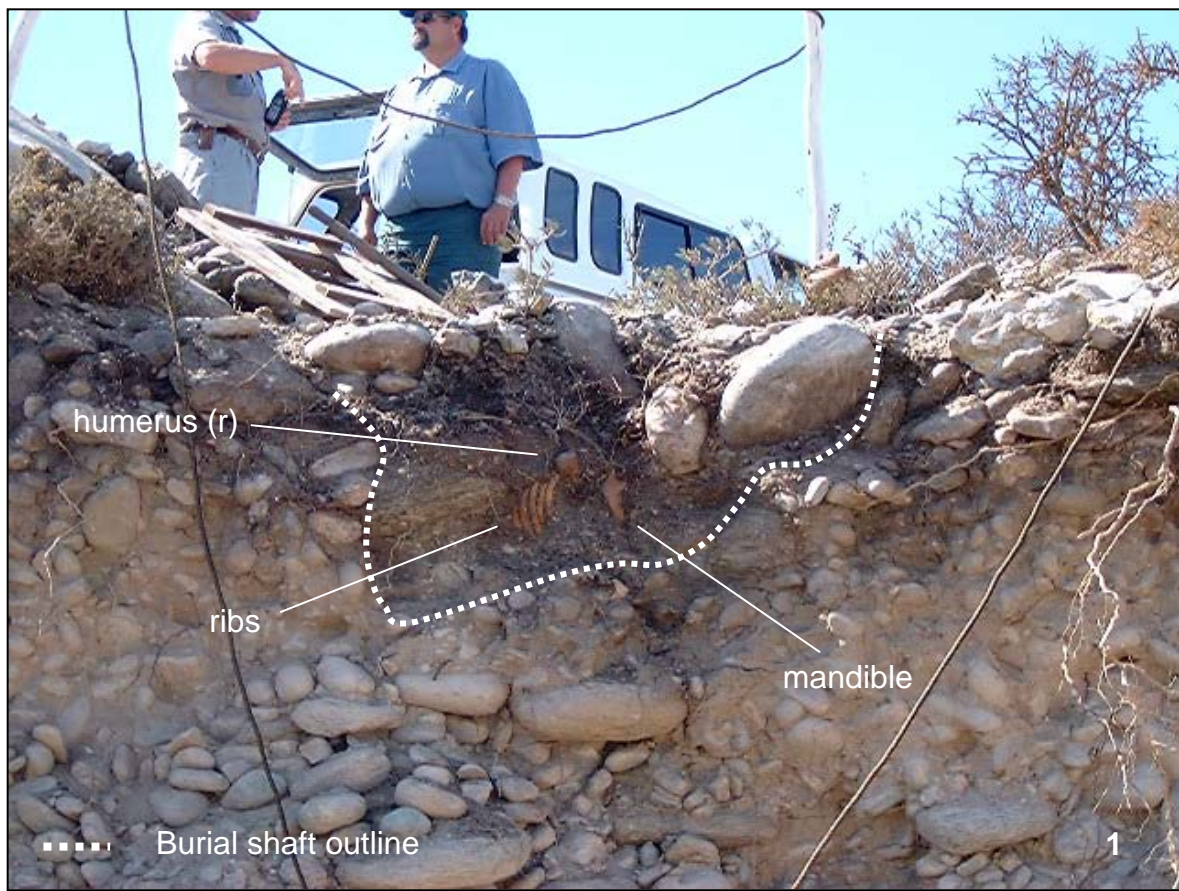
Sub-contractors should be made aware of the possibility of finding human remains. As soon as these are located they should be reported. Most important is that they be told that they must not move any bones or other grave contents.

8. PROFESSIONAL TEAM

Fieldwork	Dave Halkett Tim Hart
Report	Dave Halkett

9. REFERENCES

- Jerardino, A.M., Yates, R., Morris, A.G. & Seally, J.C. 1992. A dated human burial from the Namaqualand coast: observations on culture, biology and diet. South African Archaeological Bulletin, 47:75-81.
- Smith, A.B. & Pfeiffer, R.H. 1992. Col. Robert Jacob Gordon's notes on the Khoikhoi 1779-80. Annals of the South African Cultural History Museum vol.5 no.1.



An additional foramen may indicate that an additional tooth was present



Hoof bones from a small sub-adult animal, possibly a steenbok, found buried underneath the left arm.