

limpopo

# SAHRA

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Dear Maria

Very many thanks for your reports:

**Report on the Pot Burial from Melora Saddle, Lapalala Wilderness (Melkriver 2328 CD1).**

**Archaeological excavations at the site of Olieboomspoor, Northern Province, South Africa.**

Your co-operation in keeping SAHRA informed of your activities is much appreciated.

Very many thanks

Mary Leslie: Archaeologist  
for CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
Copy: SAHRA Provincial Office;

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2001-05-30

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Dear Mary

8/97/05/004/51 ?

**REPORT: PERMIT NO 8/07/05/004/51  
OLIEBOOMSPOORT ELLISRAS, NORTHERN PROVINCE**

A report on the above site is attached for your attention.

Regards

*Maria Van der Ryst*

MARIA VAN DER RYST

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT THE SITE OF OLIEBOOMSPOORT, NORTHERN PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a preliminary report on the research at Olieboomsport. The field work will be finalised by June 2001. A final report on the project will be submitted after completion of the research as well as copies of any publications.

## BACKGROUND

Olieboomsport is a large rockshelter on the western edge of the Waterberg plateau in the Mokolo drainage basin (AFGUNS 2327 DC1). The occupation sequence dates back to at least the Middle Stone Age, and probably the Early Stone Age according to excavations undertaken by Mason in the 1950s. The focus of the current project is on the Later Stone Age (LSA) and will link up with research data on the Waterberg Plateau. A basic consideration is to establish the settlement sequence of the lower-lying bushveld. Another theme to receive attention is the acquisition of resources and the particular influence of the Waterberg ecosystem on LSA settlement patterns and on the lifestyle of the hunter-gatherers. Particular focus, as in previous research, will be on the influence of the immigrant Iron Age farmers on the indigenous LSA hunter-gatherers.  $C^{14}$  dates obtained from recent excavations indicate that the LSA ranges from historic times to a few thousand years ago. Technological (and functional) characteristics of and changes in the artefact assemblage are apparent. Objects prepared with high labour investment, for example a linkshaft with finely incised decorations, suggest personalized prestige gear (Blankholm 1996:33). Interaction with Iron Age farmers is attested to by ceramics and other material cultural items such as cowrie shells and glass beads. The ceramic sample contains Bambata, Happy Rest, Eiland and Moloko pottery.

## EXCAVATIONS

In addition to four previous periods of archaeological investigations (1997 - 1998), three excavations were undertaken, namely in March/April 1999, August 1999 and June 2000. The field work scheduled for April 2000 was cancelled as a result of the extremely high rainfall and wet conditions experienced over the whole of South Africa during the first part of this year and particularly in March. The shelter is situated a few metres from the bank of the Rietrivier, a tributary of the Mokolo River and the area up to the talus was completely flooded, making access difficult. The camp area was under water until May

and a bridge had to be constructed to have access to the camp for the June excavations. The deposit was also too damp to excavate before winter.

## ARTEFACTUAL ASSEMBLAGE FROM OLIEBOOMSPOORT

### STONE

#### □ **Hunting, fishing and gathering equipment**

The sequence includes Post-Classic as well as Classic Wilton. Although recent ethnoarchaeological data suggest that discrete, activity-specific areas within sites may be rare in the archaeological record (O'Connell 1991:61), differential spatial utilisation of the shelter is evident. There is demarcation between the private areas and hearths and the communal activity areas where most of the stone and bone working and maintenance took place. The general pattern shows that specific activities are more noticeable in some areas but it is also clear that different activities were not completely segregated.

CCS materials are the preferred raw materials for the various classes of stone tools. Felsite and quartzite have been used for larger tools, nutting stones, stone punches, hammers and grinders. Quartz crystals are abundant and were also used as a source of raw material for the Classic Wilton formal implements such as segments, and various backed tools.

Bonnie Williamson of the Department of Archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand has undertaken to scrutinise a selection of stone tools from the LSA levels at OBP for possible residues, such as plant and animal processing residues. A selection of stone tools from the June 2000 and June 2001 excavations is to be submitted for this purpose.

#### □ **Grooved stones**

Numerous grooved stones made on sandstone, with grooves at all angles, are present. From ethnographic and historic sources we know that they were used to straighten arrow shafts, apply poison to arrowheads and in the manufacture of ostrich eggshell beads, as well as for the manufacture of bone awls, needles and points.

#### □ **Haematite and ochre**

Colouring materials, mostly red ochre, haematite and specular haematite are remarkably abundant throughout the sequence. Some of the ochre exhibit abraded planes, scraping or striations along the edges or a crayon shape.

In a paper delivered by Dr Ian Watts on the *Changing Patterns of Ochre Use in the MSA at Blombos Cave: Preliminary Results*, it was pointed out that the Stillbay component is associated with high relative frequencies of pigment compared to other MSA sites but that the site of Olieboomsport has also yielded large quantities of ochre, and also that ochre pencils are relatively abundant at the

site. Analyses of the material recovered from the current excavations at OBP are not completed but the preliminary research supports Mason's findings of exceptionally high numbers of ochre.

## BOTANICAL REMAINS

- Plant material is present throughout, but is dominated by a variety of seeds and nut endocarps, mostly recovered from hearth areas.
- Worked wood include artefacts such as a pointed peg (*Grewia* sp.), fragments of fire sticks and drills, part of a digging stick, etc.

## FAUNA

- The preliminary faunal analyses indicate that small to medium animals are dominant. These include grey duiker (*Sylvicapra grimmia*), klipspringer, (*Oreotragus oreotragus*), steenbok (*Raphicerus campestris*), bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*) and impala (*Aepyceros melampus*), but also large bovids such as buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*), eland (*Taurotragus oryx*), giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*), zebra (*Equus burchelli*), blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), roan (*Hippotragus equinus*), waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*), kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) and tsessebe (*Damaliscus lunatus*). Very high numbers of tortoise, mostly *Geochelone pardalis*, are present. Fish bones occur consistently throughout all levels.

Significant numbers of dassie (*Procavia capensis*), in addition to other fur-bearing mammals such as caracal (*Felis caracal*), serval (*Felis serval*), Cape fox (*Vulpes chama*), aardwolf (*Proteles cristatus*), badger (*Mellivora capensis*), civet (*Civettictis civetta*), greater cane rat (*Thryonomys swinderianus*), tree squirrel (*Paraxerus cepapi*) and mongoose (*Mungos mungo*), are present. During the nineteenth century leopard and dassie skins were some of the primary tribute items delivered to the Northern Ndebele by the residual small bands of hunter-gatherers living in the lowlands of the Limpopo Valley (Schlömman 1898:66-67).

- Fish bones occur consistently throughout all levels.
- A very worn human molar was recovered from the MSA levels during the initial investigations.

## WORKED BONE

- Bone implements are characteristic of the Olieboomspoor assemblage. High frequencies of bone points, awls and needles (broken as well as complete) and other bone implements were recovered. A few of the arrow linkshafts are decorated or highly polished. The technological stages used in the manufacture of the former are demonstrated by various unfinished examples.
- Three Bov I metapodials, cut, polished and filled with ochre, were found in association with a cowrie shell.

## PENDANTS AND ORNAMENTS

- ❑ This category includes stone rings, and a perforated pendant manufactured from a baboon (*Papio ursinus*) incisor. The stone rings have been submitted for residue analysis as the topic for an Honnours project by a student at the Archaeology Department of the University of the Witwatersrand.
- ❑ A cowrie (*Cypraea* sp.) with the dorsal part of the shell removed, was recovered from levels dating to approximately AD 350. The find is particularly significant as it provides an surprisingly early date for contact between San and early black farmers in the Northern Province.

## OSTRICH EGG SHELL (OES)

- ❑ Ostrich eggshell densities are particularly high and include blanks, unfinished as well as finished beads.
- ❑ Decorated ostrich eggshell fragments are present throughout the deposit. Some of these may be from broken decorated OES water containers.

## POTTERY

- ❑ The Bambata Early Iron Age pottery recovered from this site probably represents the largest collection of this ceramic tradition in Southern Africa. The calibrated dates for the layers from which these originate range from AD 607 to AD 974. Some of the ceramics from Olieboompoort can be assigned to the first phase of the Early Iron Age known as Happy Rest and are associated with the western stream expansion of the Early Iron Age into the interior of southern Africa. The later period Moloko pottery, of Sotho-Tswana origin, is also present. Various historical sources record the interaction between a Tswana-speaking chiefdom and the hunter-gatherers in this region during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (R4310/61; Schlömann 1896, 1898; Breutz 1989). The ceramic assemblage predominantly comprises non-adjoining sherds from individual vessels.

## DATING

22 Radiocarbon dates have been processed on charcoal, seeds, ostrich eggshell and bone.

### $C^{14}$ dates obtained from recent excavations

Pta-	Sample designation	Radiocarbon age (BP)	Calibrated Date
7777	Surface	80 ± 45	Most probable cal date 1900
7778	Layer 1	150 ± 45	AD 1684-1741; 1808 (1830, 1878) 1950
7780	Layer 2	1310 ± 40	AD 689 (769)790
7799	Layer 3	1530 ± 40	AD 554(599)628
7798	Layer 3	1700 ± 45	AD 375(408)431
8027	Layer 4	1610 ± 50	AD 428(529)562
8030	Layer 5	2000 ± 24	AD 31(64)80
8032	Layer 6	1600 ± 50	AD 434(536)753
8037	Layer 7	1410 ± 25	AD 654(663)672
8024	Layer 8	1517 ± 50	AD 464-478; 518(554)607

## PROPOSED PROGRAMME FOR 2001

1. Completion of the archaeological excavations during June 2001.
2. Documentation of the rock art at the site and tracing of selected images by Ghilraen Laue under supervision of Dr Ben Smith of the Rock Art Research Unit, Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand.
3. Documentation of selected rock art sites in the area.
4. Continued analyses of the excavated material.

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