

Figure 1. The stone walled enclosure in the Balfour dam catchment area. This ruin is also known as site no. 10 in the 1988 impact study by Huffman .

BLINKPOORT 396 JR

S. M. MILLER.
August 2000



Acknowledgements:-

This research was initiated and funded by Alkis Doucakis. Owing to his intense interest in South African history, and his philosophical approach, we were allowed this small window into the past of the people of the Suikerbosrant. Even if we cannot boast with great finds, the road has been opened to new approaches of interpretation of certain sites. This will lead us to a better understanding and analyses of settlement pattern. Especially with overlapping utilization of sites by different cultures.

Secondly special thanks goes to Mr. Res (and his family) the owner of Blinkpoort. In the present time, it is difficult to allow strangers access to one's property, without some feelings of doubt. Even more so when archaeologists are uncovering evidence of past occupation by other groups. Mr Res also helped with finding local people that were employed on the excavation.

The UNISA department of archaeology's support with two visits, as well as their lending of survey equipment is highly appreciated. Similarly thanks goes to Wits for the supply of literature regarding the impact survey on the Balfour dam and other material.

Also we wish to express our appreciation to the five local women and eight local men who helped with the carrying, digging, and all the labour intensive tasks.

Finally thanks to Allan Callahan for the company on the site and in the evenings, and to Anna Steyn who fielded all the problems not related to the fieldwork.

9/10/2001
2010/07/01/01/01/01

Report on excavations at
BLINKPOORT 396 JR
during August 2000

S.M.MILLER

Background

The Voortrekker laagers of Potgieter and Maritz were apparently located in the Suikerbosrant region during the second punitive expedition against Mzilikazi in 1837¹. As these two laagers, with several hundred people, were stationary during the expedition's absence, it is believed that some archaeological evidence could remain to mark the laagers exact locations.

Also present in the region are a large number of stone walled enclosures. These are believed to be remnants of past Sotho-Tswana inhabitants of the region. It is known from other parts of the country that the white pioneers people often utilized these locations for shelter for their livestock or as sources for building material for their own houses.² The Blinkpoort excavation thus focussed on a roughly circular stone walled enclosure (figure 1). This enclosure seem to form part of a larger group of ruins that are situated on top of and on either side of "Aasvoelkop"(figures 3, 4 and 11). This will be one of a number of excavations that will be undertaken to try to establish the relationship, if any, between the Sotho-Tswana sites and the Voortrekkers.

¹P.J. van der Merwe, "Die Matebeles en die Voortrekkers" in Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis (Pretoria, 1986); R.K. Rasmussen, Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa. (London & Cape Town, 1978).

² Research by Miller on KUDU ranch Lydenburg in 1999 confirms this principle where at least fourteen boerehuisies (pioneer homes) were located on or next to Iron Age sites.

Early farm names such as Malanskraal, Steynskraal and Bothaskraal on the 1 : 50 000 map 2628 CB Heidelberg (Gauteng) may suggest that similar practices were in place in the Suikerbosrant region.

2628DA BALFOUR



Figure 2. Position of the site on the 1:50 000 map 2628DA BALFOUR, 3rd edition, 1991.

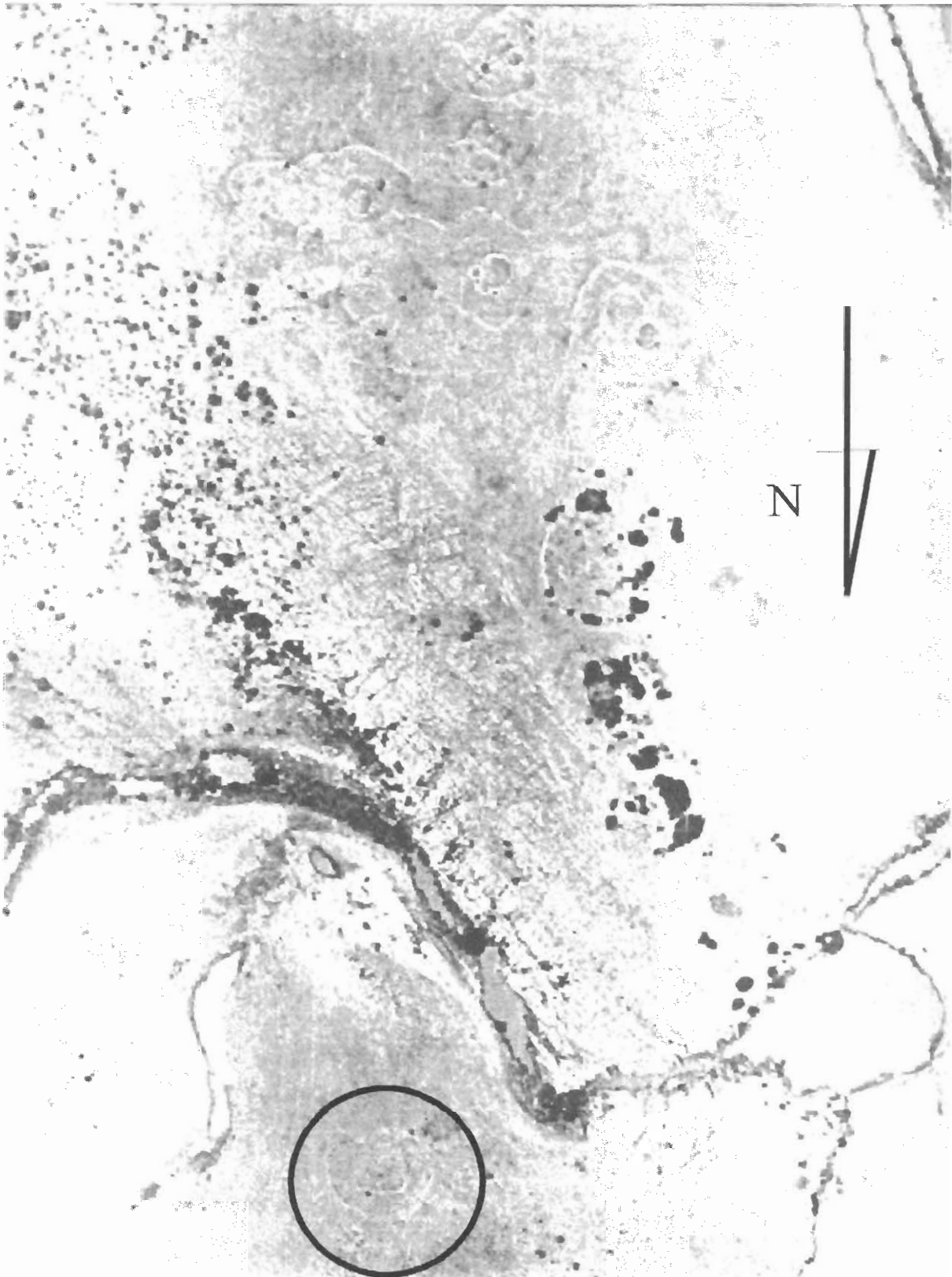


Figure 3. A section of photo 2516 on strip no 25 of job no 55 in 1945 by the Chief Directorate Surveys and Mapping. Site no. 10 is in the middle bottom of the photograph, while more sites can be seen to the south.

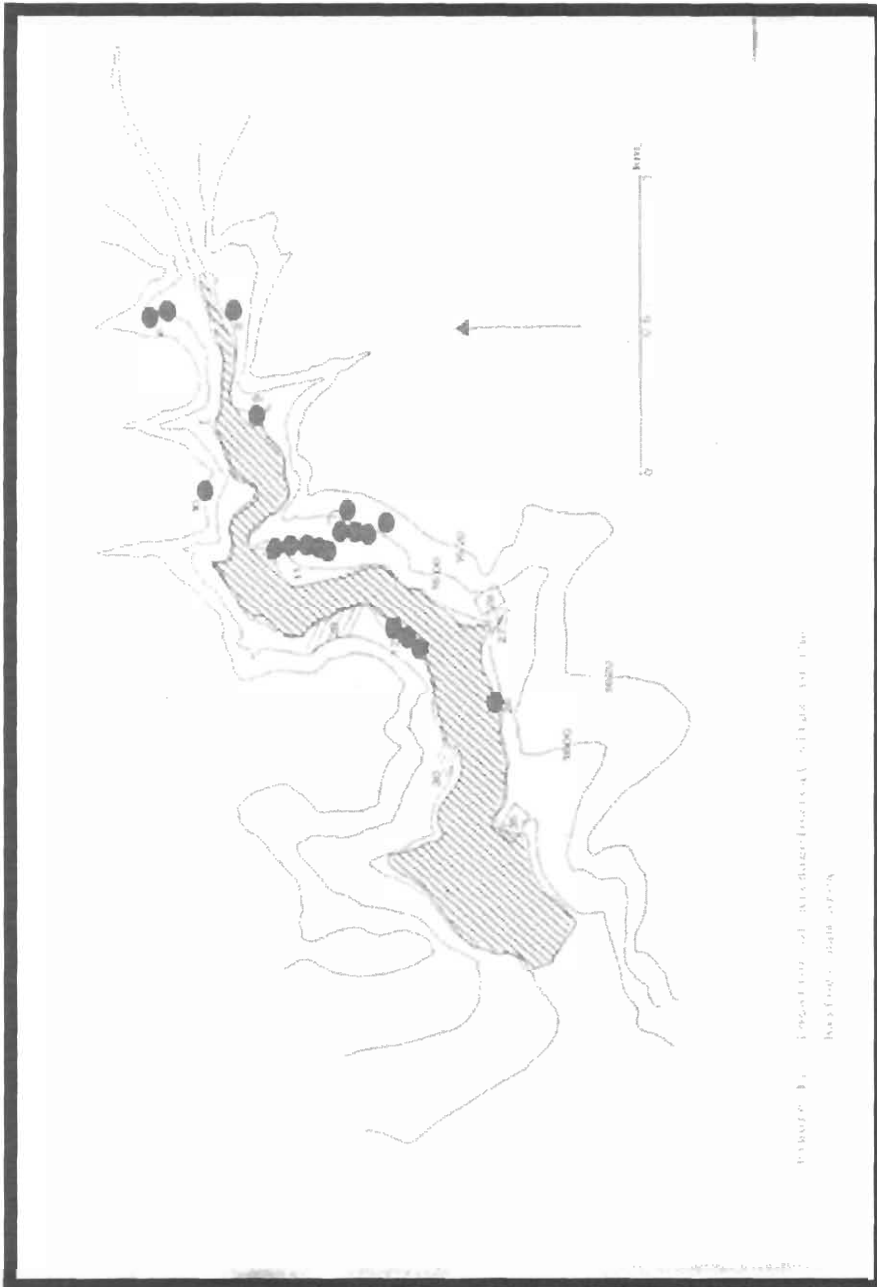


Figure 4. Location of the archaeological sites surveyed by Huffman during the second survey for the proposed Balfour dam. Site no. 10 is the one presently being investigated.

Location

The site investigated is situated at 28 31 30 (E) and 26 33 40 (S) on the 1:50 000 2628 DA BALFOUR (figure 2). The site is situated on the northern bank of the Suikerbosrant river between the two ridges marked Aasvoelkop and Suikerbosrant, lying at 1 580 m above sea level (figures 2,3 and 4). The hills are formed by the dipping of sandstone and shale layers towards the west, rising up to 120 meters above the mean level of the surrounding highveld plains.

Vegetation is mainly the well-known Suikerbos, but patches of Gwarrie and Karree are also present. Grass and soil types provide excellent grazing and cultivation opportunities but wood for building purposes and firewood do not seem

to be readily available at the date of excavations. Temperatures rise to the mid-thirties in summers and can fall to minus ten degrees Celcius in winters. At the time of the excavations the average precipitation per annum is about 900 millimeters ³

³Personal communication with Mr Res, (farm owner) at Blinkpoort in August 2000.

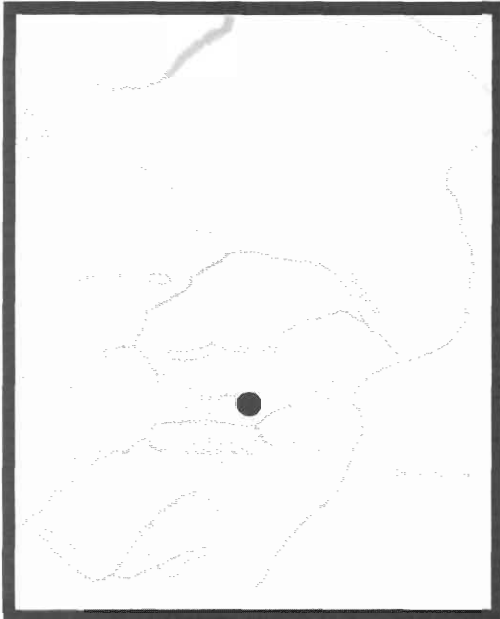


Figure 5. Distribution of the Uitkomst grouping according to Huffman 2000 and the location of the Blinkpoort site.

Publications on similar sites

The type of sites investigated fall in the greater range of sites known as the Sotho-Tswana group. These have been recorded from as far south as the Caledon¹ (figure 6) to as far north as the Lydenburg area (figures 7 and 8).⁴ Many early traveller authors such as Campbell, Arbousset & Daumas, Casalis, Smith, Levallant and Backhouse, have given descriptions of actual visitations to many of these sites (figures 15 and 16),⁵ although no records are available of descriptions of the Suikerbosrant sites.

Similarly twentieth century historians have described the Sotho-Tswana cultures to the best of their abilities. Early writers were Stow, Ellenberger and MacGregor, while others such as Van Riet Lowe and Walton have also contributed. For a more comprehensive summary of this material reference can be made to Maggs⁶.

For archaeological material, the following authors can be consulted:- Collet, Evers, Huffman, Inskeep,

Maggs, Mason, Van Rensburg, Miller, and many more, but for a comprehensive summary one can read Huffman's latest article⁷. Here the Suikerbosrant group is placed under what Mason has termed the "Uitkomst" material. A possible time span of between 1650 and 1820 is suggested for the Blinkpoort sites.

Other archaeological material in the close vicinity

The Blinkpoort site no. 10 remains are not a rare occurrence of this type of site in the Suikerbosrant area. In the impact study for the Balfour Dam (figure 4) Huffman has identified many more such sites, including Stone- and Pioneer-Age remains. Standing on the top of the Aasvoelkop and Suikerbosrant hills one can observe similar stone walled ruins not listed by the Huffman impact study, as these latter ruins were not affected by the flooding of the dam. Prior to and during the excavations, sites on the Lagerspoort and Barnardskop farms were also

¹ Maggs, 1976 pp 1

³ Collet, 1982 pp 34-43

⁵ These sources may be individually studied, but researchers such as Maggs, 1976, have already tapped the information to condensed form.

⁶ Maggs, 1976 pp 4).

⁷ Regionality in the Iron Age: The case of the Sotho- Tswana. (2000)

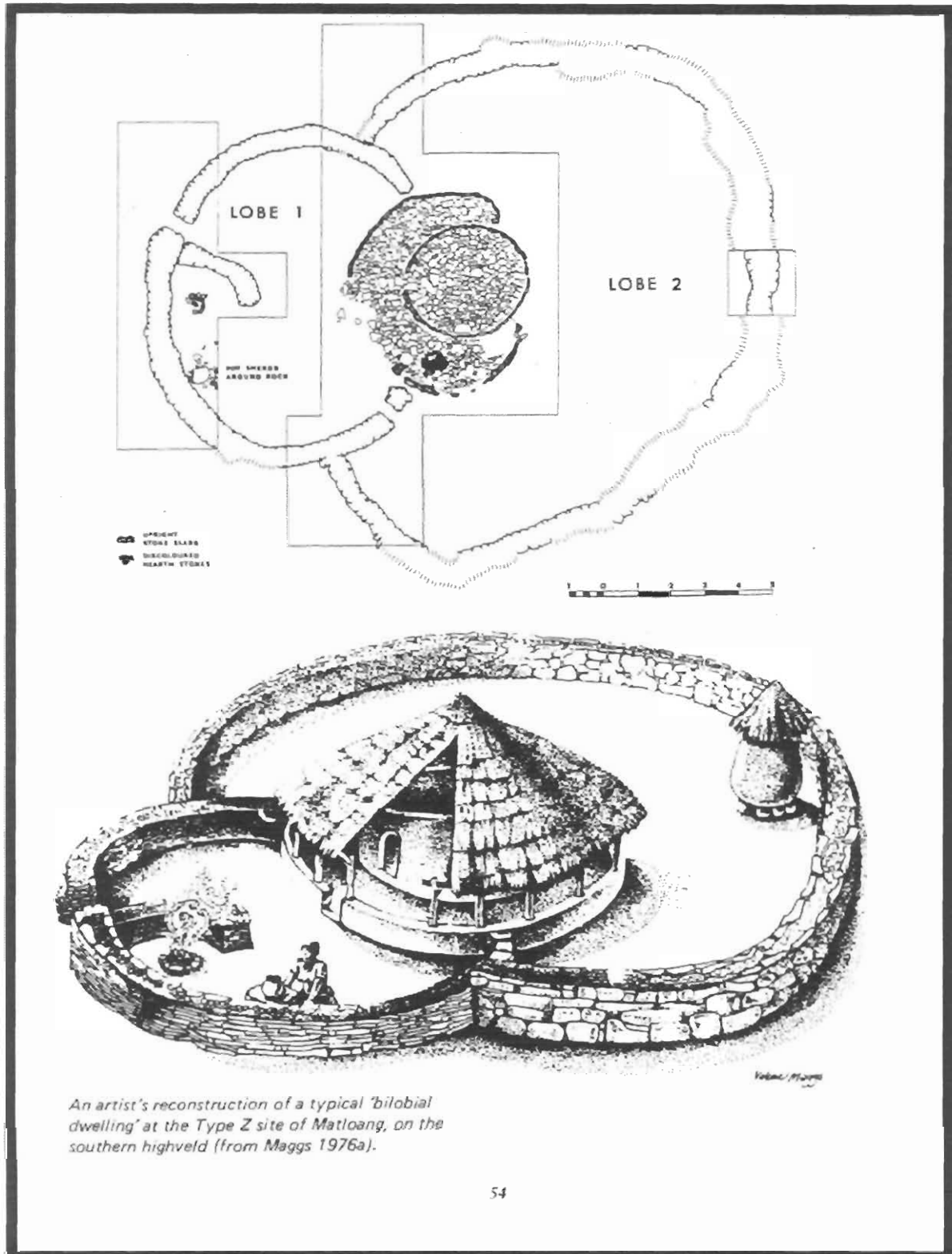


Figure 6. Maggs's 1976 illustration of the possible appearance of a typical "bilobial" dwelling of the Sotho-Tswana after the full adaptation of stone walling.

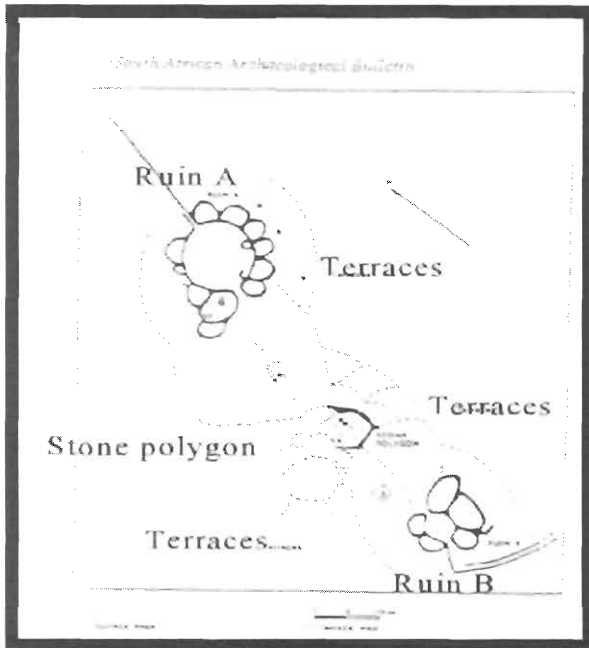


Figure 7. Collet's Badfontein site (1981, 34)

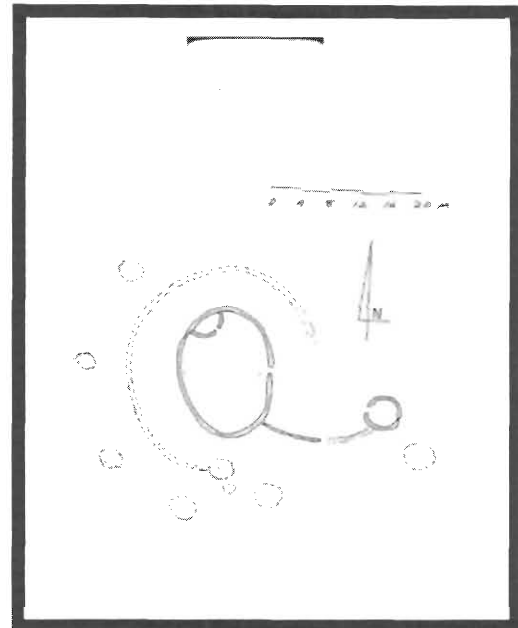


Figure 8. Stone walled stock pen surrounded by houses without perimeter wall recorded by Miller in Lydenburg region

briefly visited⁸.

An important observation on the Barnardskop farm was the extreme difference between the sites where middens occur and the sites where no middens occur. According to the farm owner the "midden less" sites were located in what is generally known as sour veld. This could not be verified, but the author observed that the sites with middens were located in the open away from any mountain or hills, while the "midden less" sites were definitely associated with more protected sites.

The placement of villages in inconvenient places is very clearly explained by "Liqueling the Regent" at "Kurreechane". This was observed in May 1820 when the missionary John Campbell visited this well-known site in the Zeerust area and asked the regent why the town was located so high up the mountain? He said :-

*"... it was because of the enemies, and that several other towns for the same reason were built on eminences, but they found it very inconvenient, being so far from wood and water..."*⁹

This is the result of pressure from internal population growth, and not necessarily from the influence of Mzilikazi alone who carries a lot of blame for the movement of people to more protected settlements.

⁸ Visits in July and August 2000 to the farms of A. Strachan and L. Ankiewicz, respectively. Barnardskop is situated to the southeast of Balfour in Mpumalanga.

⁹ Campbell, *Travels in South Africa... Second journey (1820)*: 1822, p232.

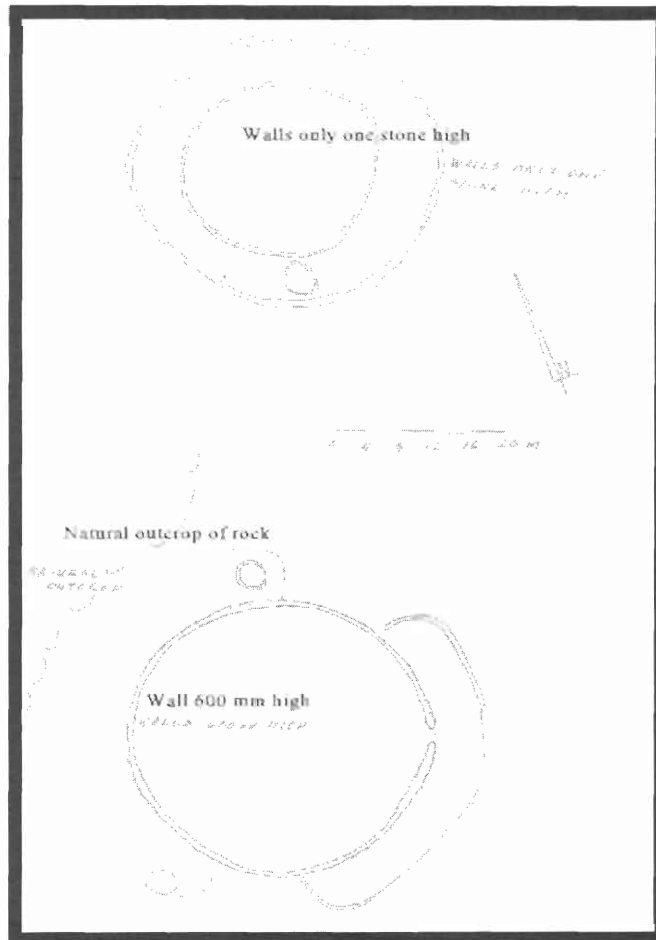


Figure 9. A “double” or “twin“ site showing “central” enclosures for animals with space for surrounding homes. These type of sites seem to be closer in design to the site no 10 ruin investigated at Blinkpoort than to the complex scalloped types. (Miller 1999).

In the same interview ¹⁰ Liqueing mentions that his rival Makkabba did not desire the peace advocated by the missionaries, as it would :-

“.....prevent his gain. He and his people fought, but it was to regain cattle that was stolen from them.”

Huffman’s report mentions the general existence of both middle and late Stone Age artifacts in the flooded area. During the excavations several late stone age artifacts were found, but were probably disturbed from the original surface during the cut-to-fill¹¹ operation of site construction.

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹ To create suitably level surfaces for house construction, soil was cut out from the higher areas and placed on the lower areas of the site.

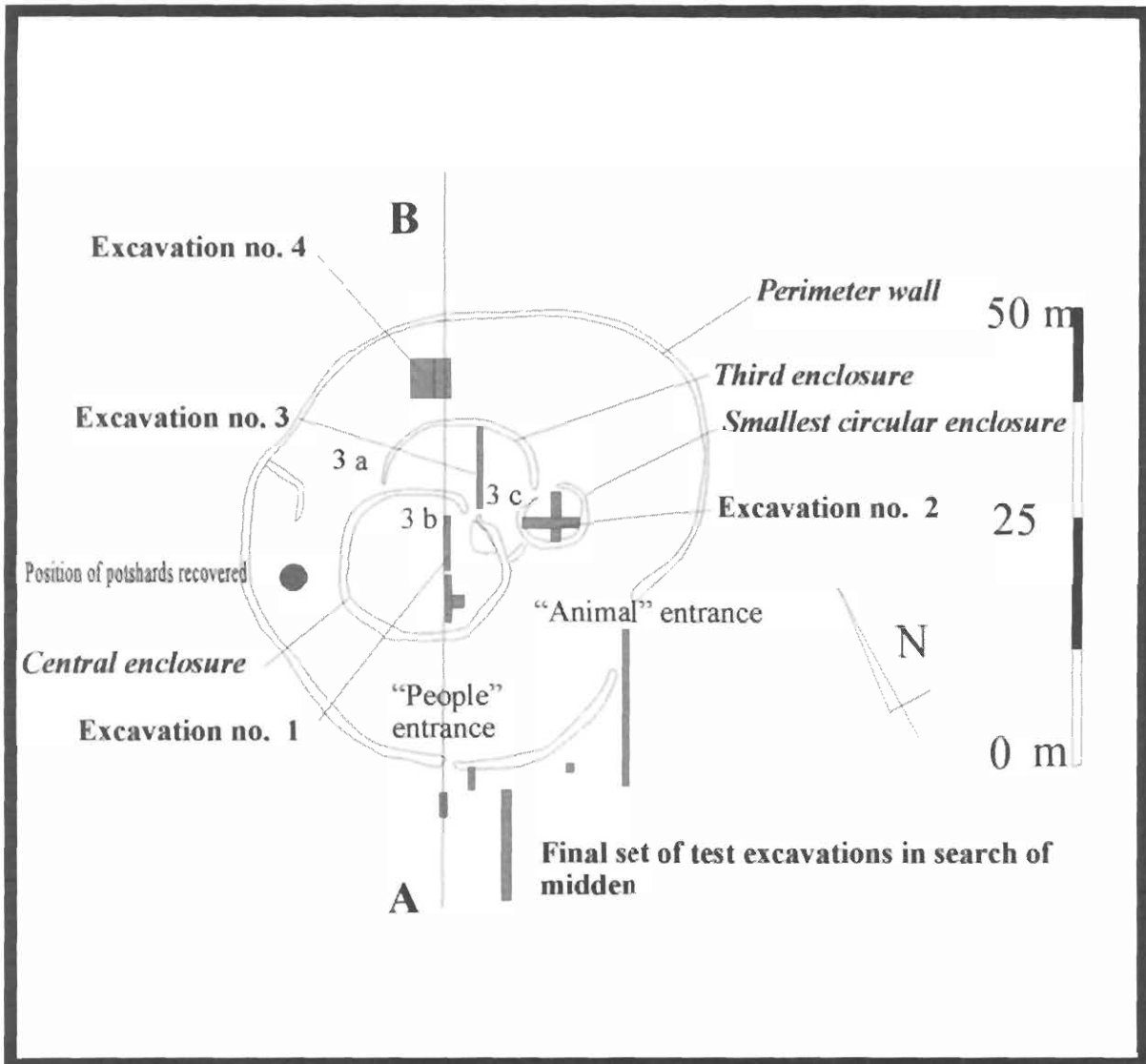


Figure 10. The schematic map of Blinkpoort site 10 showing the positions of the different excavations, as well as the position of the potsherds recovered. For more detail see the original site map as recorded during the excavation.

Middle stone age artifacts were found during a visual inspection of the area surrounding the Blinkpoort site. Owing to the richness of this material in general, it cannot be regarded as belonging to activities undertaken on the Iron Age site.

The site map

A site map (see figure 10) was produced by placing a 20-meter grid over the site on the ground, and taking tape measurements to obtain data to draw the map. The map was then tested for accuracy with the use of a NIKON electronic theodolite.

The site, known as site 10 in Huffman's "Archaeological Survey of the Proposed Balfour Dam" lies separate from the other units in the complex. Although the other units appear to be more complex because they are linked, they are very similar in layout to site 10.

The baseline AB runs approximately north south through the site, which is situated against the

hillside on a slope of 20 degrees. The site was formed by excavating into the mountainside to form a number of level areas by excavation and by filling.

The perimeter of the site was defined by a stone wall, differing in height according to fill and excavation, but was incomplete in the south-eastern section for a distance of 16 meters. (The full length of the outer wall is 150 meters with a mean diameter of 50 meters) A second entrance, roughly one meter wide, to the enclosure occurs at the south-western portion of the wall. It is

possible that the “open” section could have been closed either with palisading or with structures such as houses.

The center of the site, over a diameter of roughly 20 meters is taken up by three stone walled enclosures, one 15 meters in diameter, one five meters in diameter and one semi-circular section with a radius of seven meters. The first two enclosures are fully circular with apparently only one “entrance” into each, while the third enclosure has at least three “entrances”.

A smaller, three meter diameter stone walled “enclosure” is located against the western perimeter wall of the site.¹²

Several “mounds”, level areas, and “areas of activity” were identified and are shown on the map, but could not be positively be identified during the survey. The only area where potsherds were located is shown on the site map.

Of significance is the amount of earth and stone moved during the construction of the site. Conservatively estimated are 1 600 cubic meters of soil and 400 cubic meters of stone that were moved to make the hillside habitable. This represents approximately 2 000 man days of work.

The Excavations

The first visual inspection give the impression that the site is not “rich” in cultural material. This is due there bing no obvious midden present, and that cultural material is totally absent both in

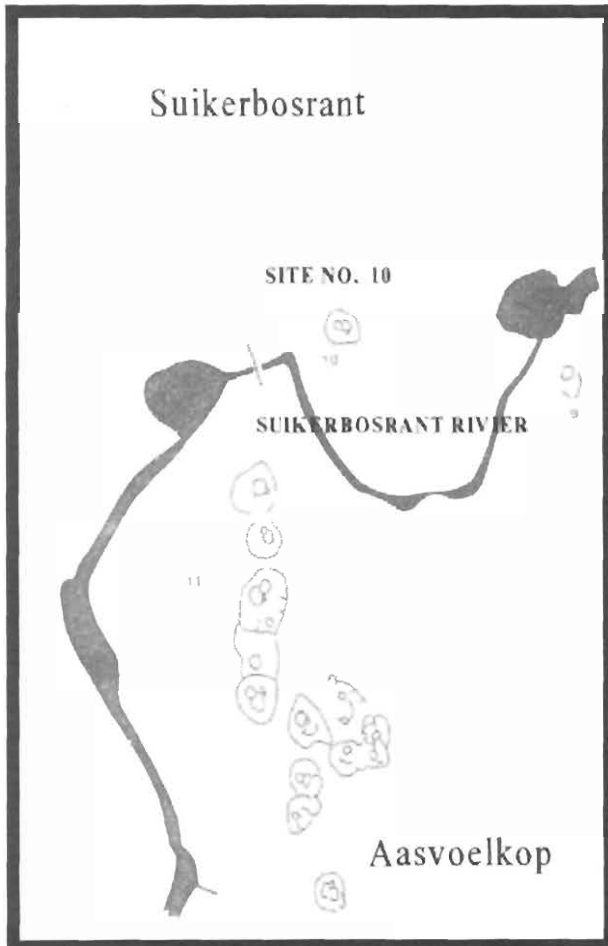


Figure 11. Huffman’s “map” of the Sotho-Tswana sites in the Balfour Dam catchment area. This gives some indication of spatial arrangement OF OTHER SITES on a larger scale. This is similar to what was found on site 10 that was fully surveyed.

¹²This wall differs from the others in that it is not an “enclosure” but forms rather a link between other structures that are no longer visible today.

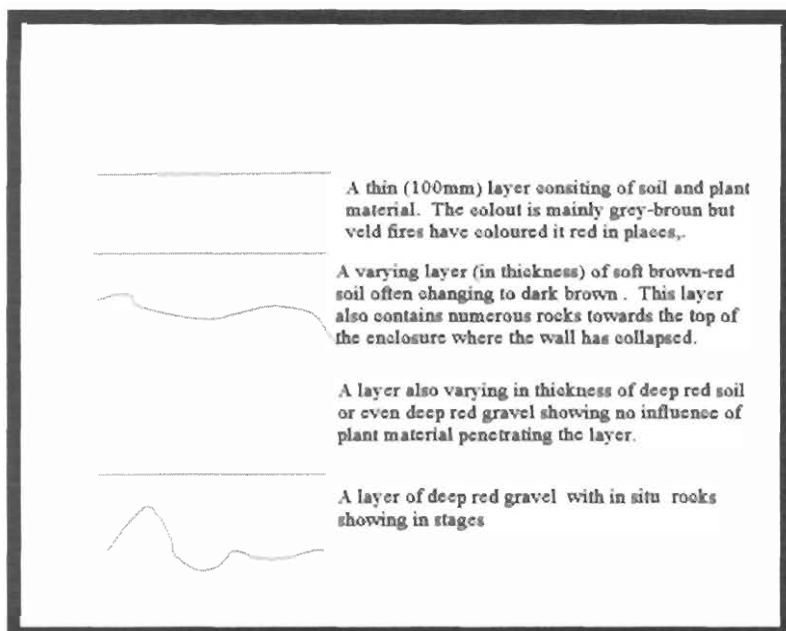


Figure 12. A schematic section through the trench excavated in the central enclosure.

composition of the material forming the base or floor of the enclosure differed from place to place as follows: (a) The excavation revealed no hard surfaces or stone bases, which strengthens the assumption that this enclosure was used as an enclosure for keeping animals.

(b) Towards the lower end of the enclosure the layer of dark brown material was also much thicker, similar to the way that dung and urine will collect naturally.

Even though the whole of the enclosure was not excavated, it can be safely assumed that this area was used for livestock and not for homes or shelters.

The section of collapsed wall excavated and re-assembled at the “entrance” of the enclosure gives an important insight into the height of the original wall. This is at least 1.4 meters high as compared to the outer wall which in some places is not even one meter high.

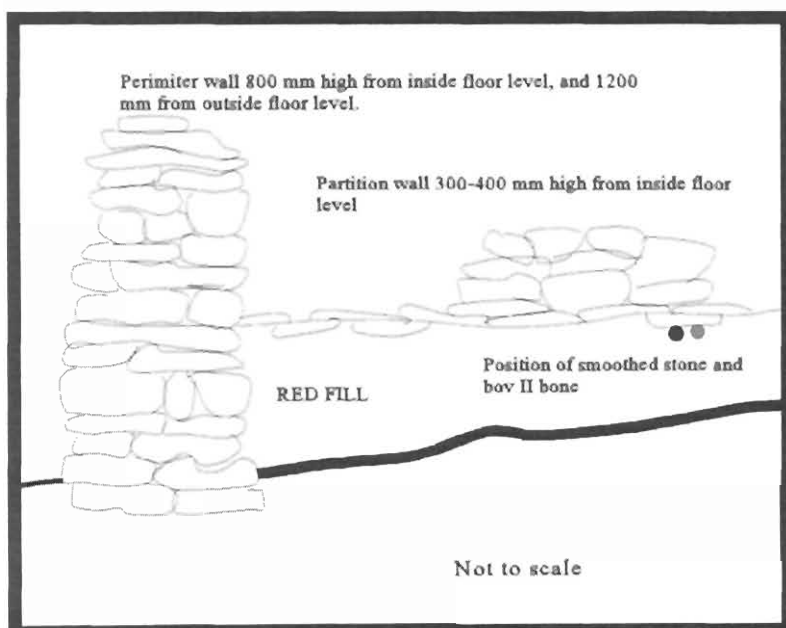


Figure 13. A schematic section through the second enclosure showing the location of the bone and smoothed stone in the excavation.

the filled and in the eroded sections that were inspected.

The excavations were then planned in such a way as firstly to yield information on activity distribution over the site. And secondly to discover cultural material for interpretation and for dating purposes.

The first trench was then located along the baseline, AB, through the central enclosure. The excavation confirmed that the area was built by cut-to-fill practices mainly through the movement of soil. Some stone from the original levels was still in position, but the

composition of the material forming the base or floor of the enclosure differed from place to place as follows: (a) The excavation revealed no hard surfaces or stone bases, which strengthens the assumption that this enclosure was used as an enclosure for keeping animals. (b) Towards the lower end of the enclosure the layer of dark brown material was also much thicker, similar to the way that dung and urine will collect naturally. Even though the whole of the enclosure was not excavated, it can be safely assumed that this area was used for livestock and not for homes or shelters. The section of collapsed wall excavated and re-assembled at the “entrance” of the enclosure gives an important insight into the height of the original wall. This is at least 1.4 meters high as compared to the outer wall which in some places is not even one meter high. In addition the enclosure has only one relatively small opening. This, with the previous information strengthens the assumption that this area was used to house animals.

The second trench was located through the smallest of the circular enclosures.

Although the main cut-to-fill method of construction was found to be similar to that of the first trench, there were also definite different building practices applied to this enclosure.

Firstly, the walls were low, reaching not much more than 800 mm from the inside floor level to the top of the walls. Secondly, an inner dividing wall stood no higher than 300 mm. These two factors suggest that a palisaded enclosure existed here, where the stone was added “ballast” to maintain the poles in an upright position.

From the rest of the excavation it also appears as if most of the enclosure was “paved” with a double layer of smallish pieces of slate. (These pieces were smaller than the pieces used in the construction of the wall itself.) The “paving” was placed directly on the red gravelly soil; most of the material “above” the paving was a deep dark brown.

Owing to its strange position in the test trench, the dividing wall was excavated to see if it contained any human remains. A large semi-oval flagstone placed in the paving and underneath the division wall was placed over a Bov II¹³ foot bone together with in conjunction with a fist-sized smoothed stone (see figure 000). Possibly no human remains is associated with this structure as its extension clearly links to the main wall which forms the partition.

On the other hand the bone and smoothed stone were purposely placed there; this is not a random occurrence. Possibly the placement of offerings to ancestors for the improvement of herds could be a likely interpretation from this find.

The third excavation (test trench) was excavated two meters to the east of baseline AB. The trench was 500 mm wide and extended across the full diameter of the third enclosure. It showed the same cut-to-fill technique as in the previous trenches, but no soil colour changes were observed as what appeared in trenches 1 and 2. No cultural material was found. Towards the north-eastern section of the trench two phenomenon were observed.

(A) It appears as if one section had been roughly paved or laid down as a base for some structure (floor ?) As there was no time to extend the excavations sideways the extent of the “paving” will have to remain an unresolved case.

(B) Secondly, towards the north-eastern section of the trench a large number of rocks was removed from above of what appeared to be the original “floor” level. These were all from the collapsed outside wall of the third enclosure. Owing to lack of time, a physical re-assembly could

¹³Bov II is a medium sized “antelope-like” animal and could include sheep and goat. Unfortunately the bone was too far decomposed for positive identification.

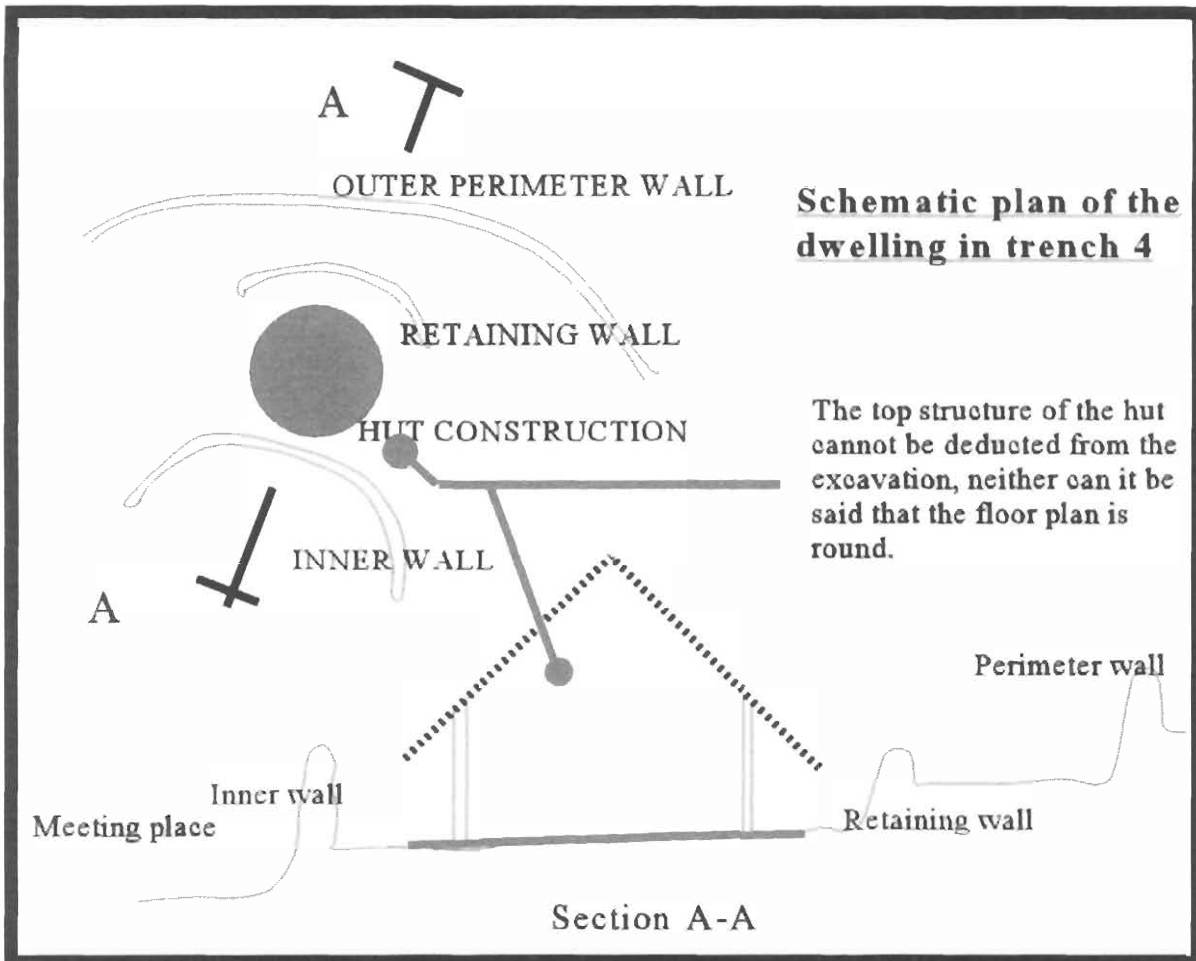


Figure 14, The Schematic representation of excavation 4. A retaining wall between the perimeter and inner walls gives shelter and space for a hut. The shape of the hut floor and the top structure could not be identified, except that it did not appear similar to some of the sturdy homes excavated on other sites to the south, i.e. in the Free State.

not be carried out. It is estimated that this wall stood over 2,2 meters high on the lower side and about 1,4 meters on the higher side.

An important observation pertaining to this enclosure is that it has three “entrances”, which is not customary for typical animal enclosures. Of especial significance is entrance 3a which gives access to a living area with no exit through the perimeter wall.

It was also observed that the “arms” of the stone wall at 3a and 3c were much lower than the central part of the wall.

From the above we may assume that the third enclosure was not used to keep animals.

Discussion:- In many of the books and papers on the Sotho-Tswana question it is notable that there is little or no reference to anything other than “kraals” and “huts” when settlement pattern

is discussed in relation to spatial orientation. From the experiences of early travellers¹⁴, significant importance is given to public meeting places. These meeting places must occur in villages and their hierarchy changes in relation with the size of the settlement and the relative position of their leaders.

The spaces were used for receiving visitors, public announcements, court procedures, trade, religious activities, festivities and many other social interactions. Owing to cattle being revered as ancestral images, and seen as a form of wealth, the cattle pens and public meeting places were usually adjacent to one another. The living quarters were then placed around this combination of kraal and meeting place in a number of ways to suit the different groups and their world views. Mason's¹⁵ illustrations on early settlements is clear although he does not name or point out meeting places in his maps and drawings. Even modern studies such as that of Huffman¹⁶ do not recognise the importance of the relationship of meeting place and kraal. These studies still depend mainly on ceramic analysis to identify smaller groups within the greater archaeological record. It is therefore strongly suspected that this enclosure is the "meeting place" on site 10.

Test excavation four consisted of two blocks measuring two meters by four meters that were laid out along baseline AB in the area between the third enclosure and the perimeter wall. It was intended to try and find more information on the architecture of the homes of the village, as well as to try and recover some of the elusive material cultural products of the site.

As in the case with most preservation on this site, nothing conclusive could be found to give us a clear understanding of the houses. The original evaquation were seemingly not under duress, as the structures were not burned down. The archaeological record in this excavation indicated that a circular (?) hut was possibly situated next to a semi-circular retaining wall. The hut does not seem to have been of great substance, as no spesific foundation as in many of the Sotho-Tswana houses documented by Mason, Maggs and Boeyens could be found.

What is of interest is the evidence that Mason has documented in the Suikerbosrant areas of the extensive use of reed, both in the frontal screens, as well as in the wall construction. Owing to the shortage of hardwood in the Blinkpoort area, the marhes to the west could have supplied sufficient reed for house construction. Such use would have resulted in less less substantial structures.

In this excavation it was again remarkable that no artifacts or other cultural remains were found..

The final the excavations consisted of a series of trenches and pits that were excavated at the lowest part of the site. The purpose here was to find a midden material that could provide cultural material, as well as charcoal for dating. These trenches were placed in and on patches of vegetation that were different to the "norm" of the surrounding area, as well as in front of the two "entrances" of the site. Nothing but deep red soil was encountered. Where the test trench

¹⁴See for instance Campbell chapter XX

¹⁵See Mason 1987 page 635

¹⁶ Huffman (2000).

5 crossed “into” the site some rock was found at a depth of about 600 mm. This could possibly have been used to keep some form of palisade in place, but it is inopportune to comment fully on this.

No cultural material was found in these excavations.

Discussion and conclusion

The original object of the excavations was to try and establish the context within which archaeological evidence of Voortrekker laagers could be evaluated. This objective has not been fully met. On the other hand sufficient data and experience have been gained so that we can positively identify the architectural and archaeological signatures of the surrounding so called Sotho-Tswana settlements. In addition we can also realize the number of variants of the Sotho-Tswana settlement over time and space.

One specially important factor that did emerge during the literature study to back the excavation is that the “kraal”, “meeting place”, “ancestral shrine” and “living area” relationships have not been sufficiently studied and discussed as indicators of regional cultural diversity. This in turn can also be applied to sites where white pioneer presence is suspected.

As described in the discussion of the site plan, notice should be taken of the immense labour that is associated with the basic construction of a site such as Blinkpoort site no. 10. With the Voortrekkers who are basically on the move as a large group, it is expected that they would rather utilize some existing “shelter”, “fortification” or “stock pen” than invest several thousand man-days in a structure that will be abandoned within a short period of time. It would be expected that they would rather adapt existing structure to specifically suit their needs.

For instance the area chosen must firstly be reasonably suitable topographically to allow access by waggon. Secondly there must be sufficient level ground available for the waggons to form a

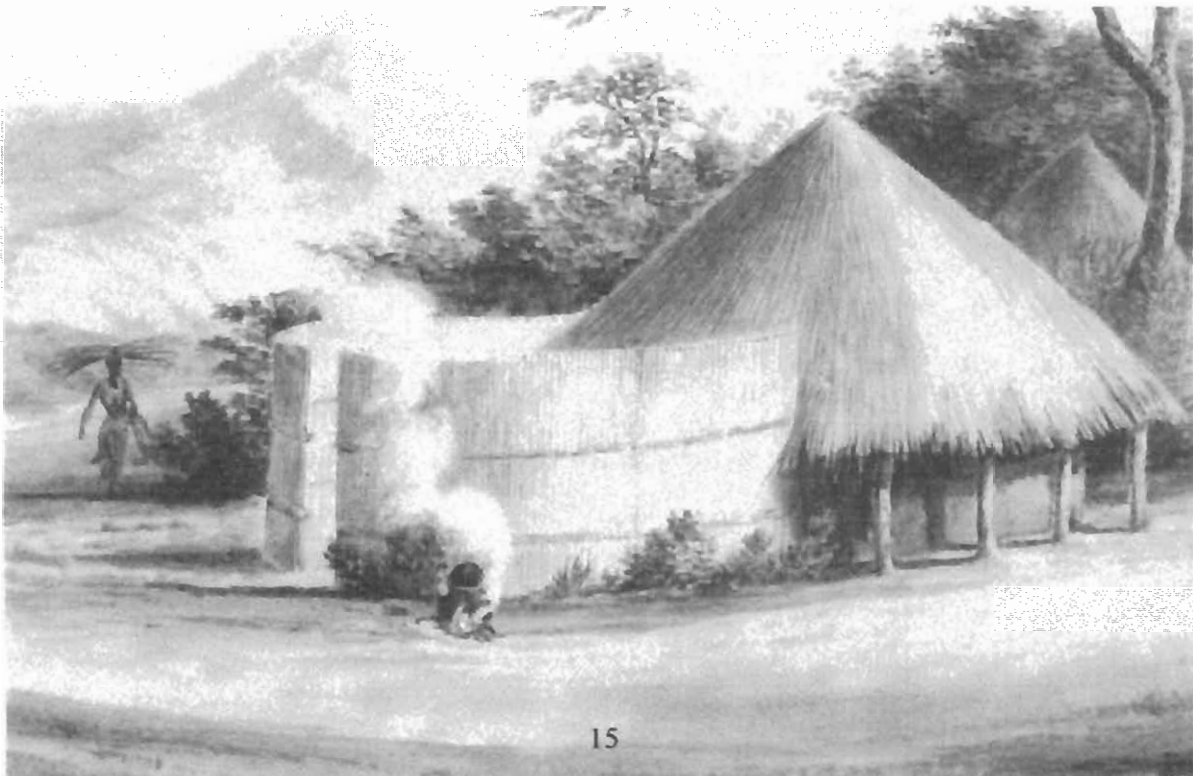


Figure 15 “Tswana dwellings, 1834” by A.D. Bell from Hammond-Tooke (1993,10)

laager and the waggons still to be usable as bedrooms , etc.

Fifty waggons, at five meters per waggon plus two meters intervening space, gives a length of 350 meters. This implies a circle with a diameter of 110 meters. This is double the diameter of Blinkpoort site no 10.

Similarly 50 waggons will have had at least six to eight oxen per waggon. This gives us 400 head of oxen alone that will have to be sheltered. Added to this, each waggon owner will have owned at least ten to twenty other cattle as well as his trek oxen. This adds at least another 1000 head of cattle to be watered, grazed and sheltered. The logistical problems of handling such large numbers of livestock (even excluding sheep, goats, and others) must have been enormous, and would not have fitted into a “permanent laager” even if it was for two or three months.

In conclusion we can say that we are dealing with a singular and lone-standing early period Sotho-Tswana site. The site consisted of two centrally located livestock kraals linked by a “meeting place”. This central area is surrounded by between seven and ten activity areas, some of which may be homesteads. These activity areas may represent between three and five families. The outer perimeter of the village is demarcated in stone walling of about 1 meter to 1,4 meters in height. Two “entrances”, one small and one large possibly give entrance to “people” and “animals”, although the larger opening could also have been closed by a palisade as a type of official entrance.

It is suspected that the ruins on top of Aasvoelkop are a continuation in time of the sites next to the river, but the complex as a whole differs radically from the midden-rich sites close to Barnardskop, from the scalloped sites excavated by Mason at Suikerbosrant, from the mega-site at Kliprivierberg, and from the corbelled huts on the Van Jaarsveld family farm between Grootvlei and Greylingstad.

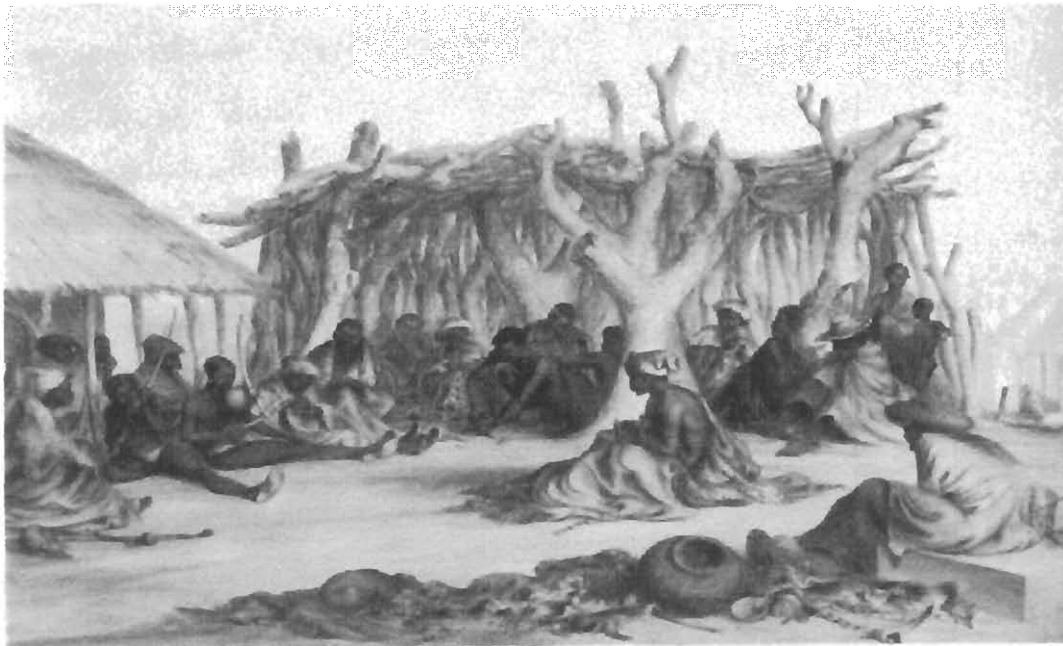


Figure 16 “A Tswana homestead on the Vaal River” by Thomas Baines from Hammond-Tooke (1993, 128)

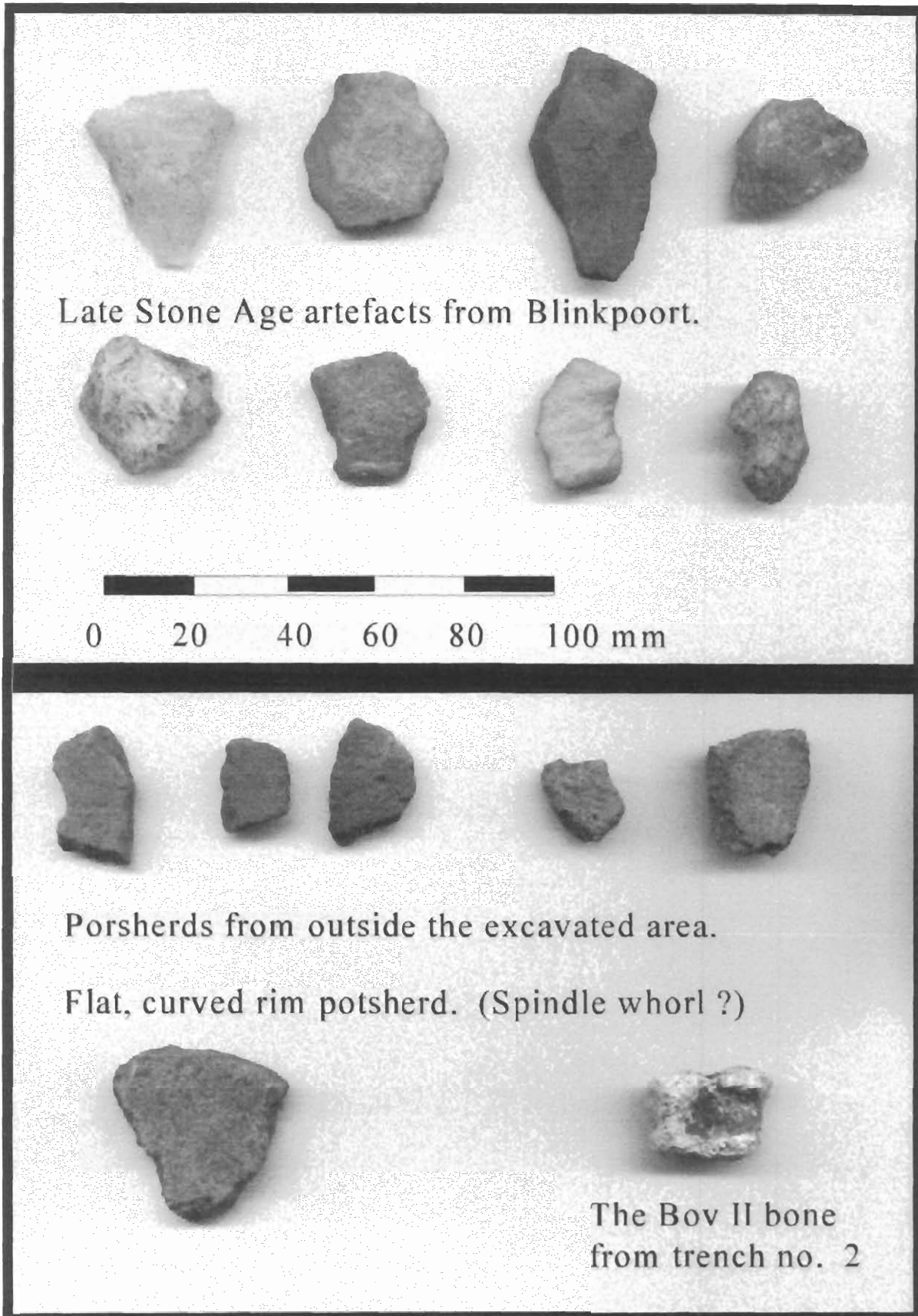


Figure 17. Stone Age artefacts, potsherds and bone recovered from the excavations.

Middle Stone Age artefacts from Blinkpoort

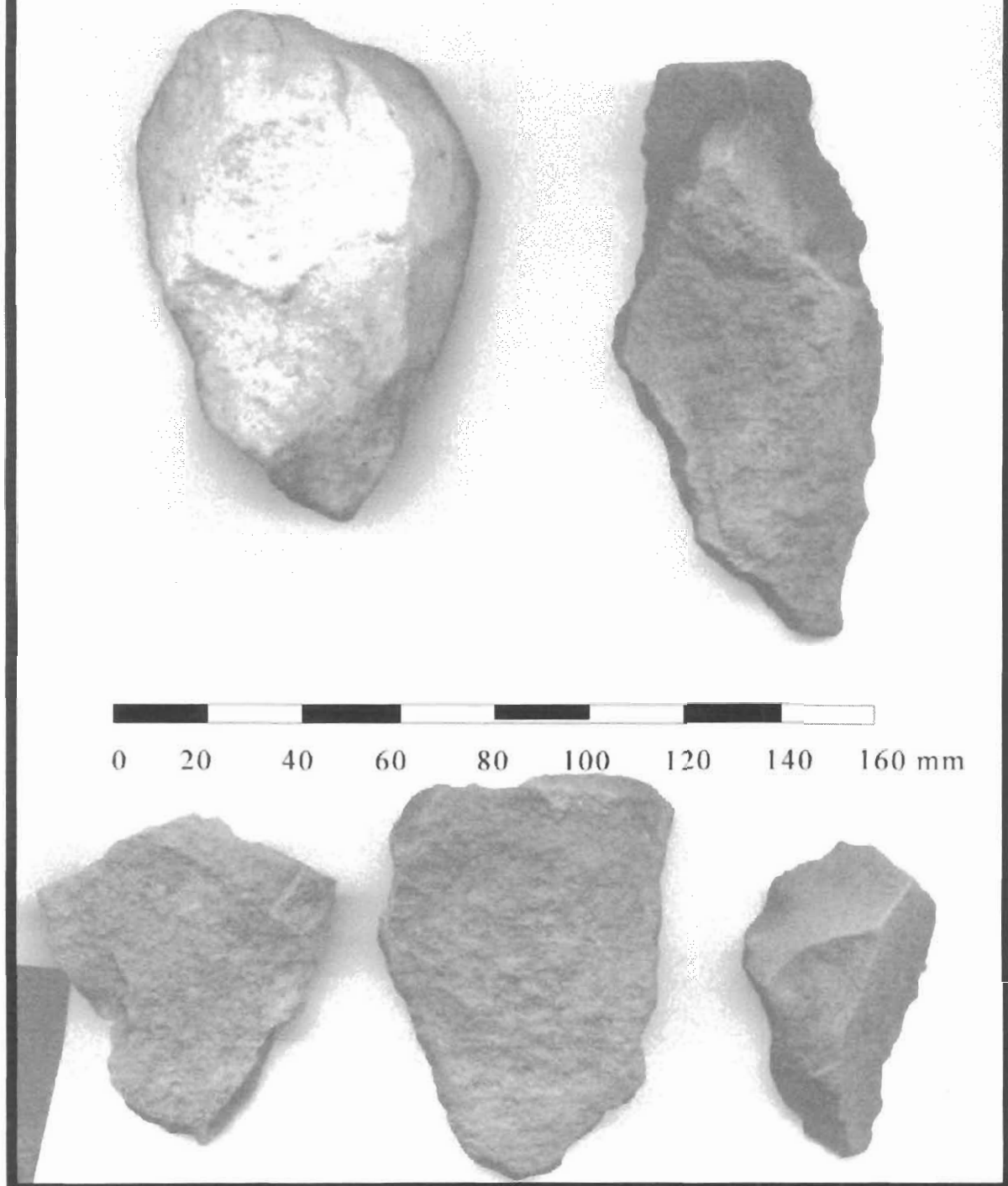


Figure 18. Middle Stone Age artefacts recorded in the vicinity of the site. This shows the long term utilisation of the poort by people from different ages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CAMPBELL, J. 1822. *Travels in South Africa, Second Journey*. Westley. London.
- COLLET, D.P. 1982. Excavations of Stone Walled Ruin Types in the Badfontein Valley, Eastern Transvaal, South Africa. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 37: 34-43.
- HAMMOND-TOOKE, D. 1993. *The Roots of Black South Africa*. J. Ball Publishers, Jhb.
- HUFFMAN, T.M. 1988. *First archaeological impact study for the construction of the Balfour Dam*. WITS dept of Archaeology.. Unpublished report..
- HUFFMAN, T.M. 1992. *Second archaeological impact study for the construction of the Balfour Dam*. WITS dept of Archaeology.. Unpublished report..
- HUFFMAN, T.M. 2000. *Regionality in the Iron Age: The case of the Sotho-Tswana*. Paper delivered at the SA 3 conference 2000 at WITS.
- MILLER, S.M. 1999. *The Archaeology of KUDU*. Unpublished report to Lydenburg Leisure Holdings.
- MAGGS, T.M. O'C. 1976. *Iron Age Communities of the Southern Highveld*. Occasional publication of the Natal Museum..
- MASON, R. 1969. *Prehistory of the Transvaal*. WITS University Press.
- MASON, R.J. 1986. *Origins of black people of Johannesburg and the Southern Western Central Transvaal AD 350-1880*. WITS.
- RASMUSSEN, R.K. 1978. *Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa*. London and Cape Town
- VAN DER MERWE, P.J. 1978. "Die Matebeles en die Voortrekkers" in *Argiefjaarboek vir Suid Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*. Pretoria.

Note: The Mason (1987) publication includes a bibliography of approximately 150 books and papers that could be referred.