Rec. 8. March 2005

Report to the South African Heritage Resource Agency
Concerning excavation permit
No 80/04/01/002/51

Mphekwane

Test excavation of site MB5 (Mont Blanc)
E 28.49.50/S23.16.20

Principal Investigator
Dr Karim Sadr
School of Geography, Archaeology
& Environmental Studies
Wits University
Private Bag 3
Wits 2050
Email: sadrk@geoarc.wits.ac.za

1 March 2005

In June 2004 a team of archaeologists from Wits University excavated a rock shelter known as Mphekwane (MB5, on farm Mont Blanc). The site, which was kindly brought to the attention of the principal investigator by Mr Edward B. Eastwood of Palaeo-Art Field Services, is located on the Makgabeng plateau in the Limpopo Province of South Africa (28.49.50E / 23.16.20S).

There are many rock paintings in the Mphekwane shelter, among which a procession of four fat-tailed sheep are of great interest to this project. On the floor of the shelter, mingled with the many flaked stone artifacts were numerous thin-walled potsherds of a type known to date to the early first millennium AD (so-called Bambata ware). As such, the site promises to shed light on two key issues concerning the Neolithic of southern Africa: when did sheep reach this part of the sub-continent and how did they get there?

A three by one meter test trench was excavated in the center of the main shelter to an average depth of 25 cm without reaching bedrock (Fig. 1). Each square meter was dug in 16 separate quads of 25 x 25 cm in area, and on average about 3 cm thick. This is a method which has been used successfully by the principal investigator in other rock shelters in southern Africa, and is adopted from a standard excavation method used in the central Karoo by Garth Sampson and his research team.

Although visible natural stratigraphy was limited to a few ash lenses in square 1, the distribution of finds, especially lithics and ceramics, suggest two main archaeological layers (Fig. 2). The upper layer contains many thin-walled potsherds and flaked quartz. The lower layer contains only a few potsherds, which probably have filtered downwards from the upper layers. Here, flaked stones are more numerous, quartz is less abundant and the stone tools are on average larger with some flakes showing prepared platforms. These may indicate the presence of Middle Stone Age deposits farther down. Mr Jayson Orton from the Archaeological Contract Office at the University of Cape Town, is currently engaged in a typological analysis of the flaked stones excavated from Mphekwane.

Animal bones were plentiful and well preserved. The upper layers contained more bone than the lower ones. Dr Ina Plug kindly identified the species present (Table 1). Most of the bones are tortoise, which seem to have been the main item in the shelter inhabitants' menu. Among the mammalian bones, small and medium bovids were common. Only one possible sheep bone was identified, and this came from the surface layer, which means it may not be associated with the early first millennium AD remains. In the absence of charcoal, three bones have been submitted to the Quaternary Dating Research Unit of the CSIR for radiocarbon dating. The results will hopefully become available later this year.

There were many ostrich eggshell beads, all of them tiny with diameters of less than 5mm. Ms Kate James is examining these as part of her BA Honours project in archaeology.

SAHRA had given a permit for test excavation at another nearby rock shelter on the farm Galashiels (Permit No 80/04/01/003/51). However, due to lack of time, we were not able

to excavate at this site. A new permit will be requested in order to examine this site in late 2005.

The excavation at Mphekwane was generously funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft through the auspices of the Sonderforschungsbereich 389 (University of Cologne, ACACIA Project). Ongoing analyses of the materials are funded by a Focus Area grant from the National Research Foundation (FA2004041300026).

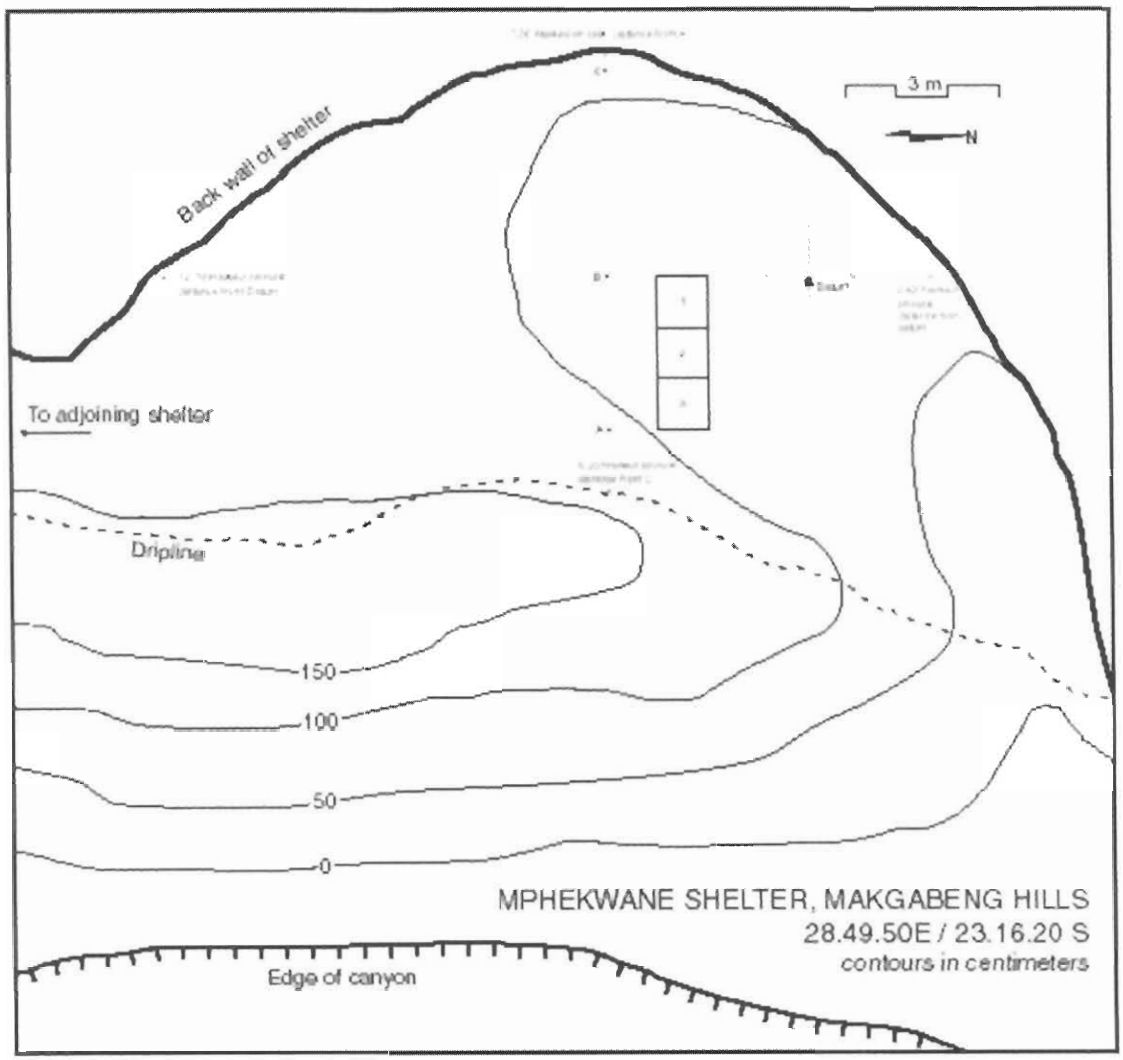

Figure 1. Mphewane site map.

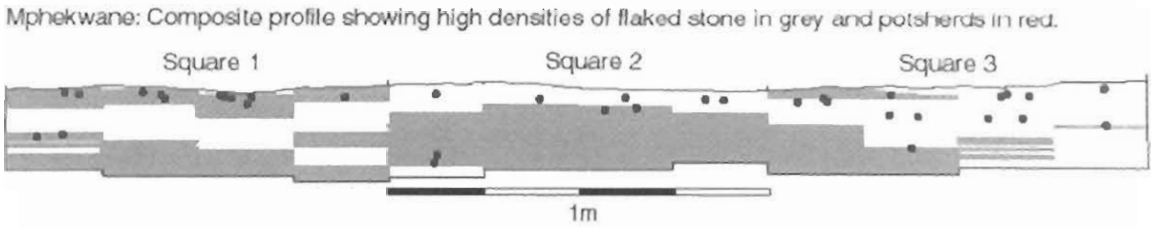

Figure 2. Cultural layers at Mphekwane as seen in the lithic and potsherd distribution.

Table 1. Mphekwane faunal and botanical remains, excluding plentiful tortoise, identified by Dr Ina Plug.

Species	*NISP*		*%*		***Total***	
Mammalian	*Upper*	*Lower*	*Upper*	*Lower*	*NISP*	*%*
Bov I	36	24	*50*	*41*	60	*46*
Bov II	22	11	*31*	*19*	33	*25*
Bov III	7	10	*10*	*17*	17	*13*
Canid		1	*0*	*2*	1	*0.8*
Carnivore small	1		*1*	*0*	1	*0.8*
Dassie	1	2	*1*	*3*	3	*2.3*
Equid		1	*0*	*2*	1	*0.8*
Hare	4	6	*6*	*10*	10	*7.7*
Hare/Dassie	1		*1*	*0*	1	*0.8*
Porcupine		1	*0*	*2*	1	*0.8*
Large rodent		1	*0*	*2*	1	*0.8*
rodent		1	*0*	*2*	1	*0.8*
TOTAL	**72**	**58**	**100**	**100**	**130**	**100**
Other						
Varanus	2		*4*	*0*	2	
Bird		1	*0*	*6*	1	
OES	21	9	*39*	*53*	30	
Achatina	25	5	*46*	*29*	30	
terrestrial snails	6	2	*11*	*12*	8	
Total	**54**	**17**	**100**	**100**		
Botanical						
Marula seeds	9	2			11	

From: "Karim Sadr" <sadrk@geoarc.wits.ac.za>
To: "Mary Leslie" <mleslie@sahra.org.za>
Date: 08/03/05 11:20am
Subject: Report to Sahra

Dear Mary,

Attached is a short report about my excavation last year in the Makgabeng Hills. A hard copy is in the mail.

Cheers

Karim

Dr Karim Sadr
Senior Lecturer
School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies
University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag 3
Wits 2050
Johannesburg, South Africa
Tel: + 27 (0) 11 717 6050
Fax: +27 (011) 339 1620
Cell: 072 142 5688
Website: http://www.wits.ac.za/geography/sadr.html