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AN OSTRICH EGGSHELL CACHE FROM THE VAALBOS NATIONAL PARK,
NORTHERN CAPE.

NATIONAL MONUMENTS COUNCIL PERMIT NO 8/93/11/011/51

FIRST AND FINAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The practice by Khoisan of burying or otherwise setting aside caches of ostrich eggshell containers - with or without contents - has been documented both ethnographically (Dunne 1910; Suggan-Ordein & Bloor 1942:91-92; Vetter 1957: see 1975) and archaeologically (Blumen 1953; Sancelowski 1971; Gubbins 1974; McGregor Museum Collection). However the latter occurrences are known all too often through fortuitous post facto reports by farmers after turning up such finds in the course of agricultural activities (Gubbins 1974). In these cases one can never be quite certain of the context, and often the remains are somewhat damaged. A cache of ostrich eggshell containers was recently found during construction of a new tour route through the Vaalbos National Park at Sydney-on-Vaal (Fig 1). Park officials had the foresight to leave their find until an archaeologist could investigate it, leading to its excavation and description in this short note.

SITE

The site where the cache was found is on a hillside facing the Vaalbos National Park entrance at a deserted outdoor toilet utilised by wardens, just off the new road. Another three were located on the side of the slope, about a metre below the surface. Mr Craig Bamcroft, Park warden, contacted the McGregor Museum, and the excavation, conducted during the following weekend, revealed a total of fifteen ostrich eggshell containers, which had been buried tightly together at the site. Material was collected, packed and stored in the laboratory. The containers were numbered but the remains were fully intact and probably represent the conditions in which they were originally placed (Fig 2).

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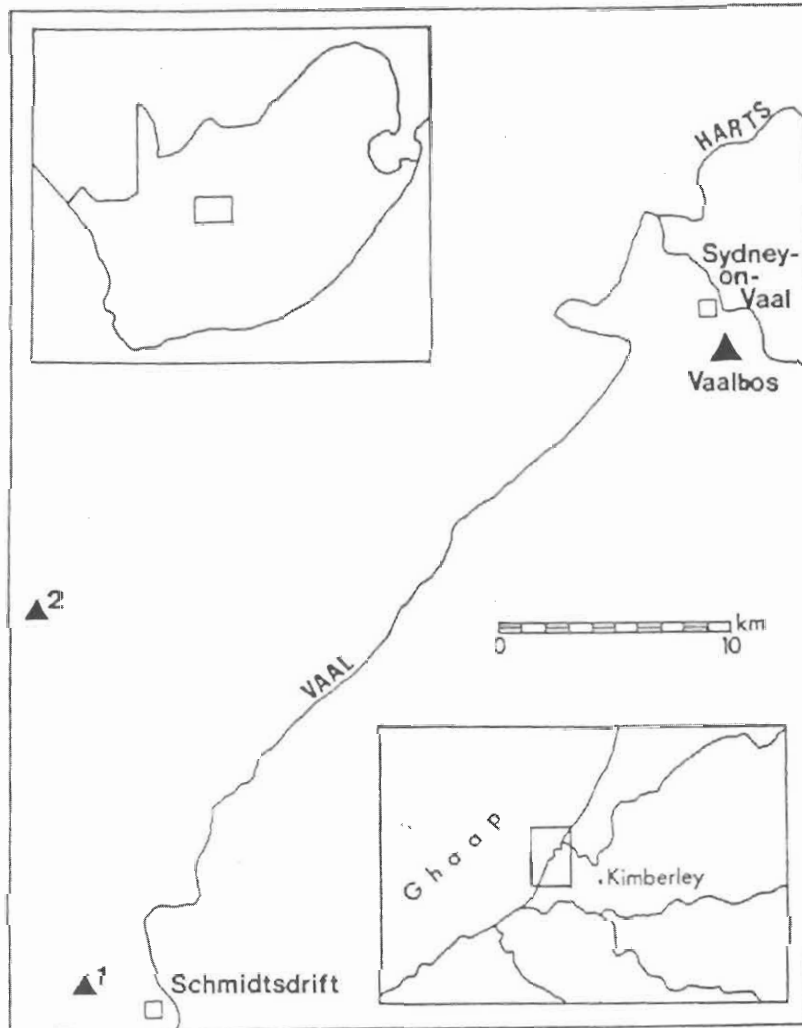


Figure 1. Map showing the position of the Vaalbos site near Sydney-on-Vaal. The point marked '1' is the approximate location of an abandoned 'Bushman' encampment described by Burchell in 1811 and mentioned in the text. '2' is the position of two shelters at Limerock, Ghaap Escarpment (Humphreys & Thackeray 1983), which yielded abundant ostrich eggshell mouth fragments and decorated pieces.

Cape, who made a variety of wooden and ceramic vessels (cf. Smith 1985): but ostrich eggshell remains do occur on what are believed to be both hunter-gatherer and pastoralist sites in this region (cf. Rudner 1971), and it is conceivable that eggshells may have served certain categories of herder containerisation in the past. Burchell (1822-4) described an abandoned 'Bushman' encampment in what appears to have been a rather similar setting to this Vaalbos site, in a thicket of large Acacias near Schmidtsdrift, about 40 km to the south, in 1811 (Humphreys 1975).

On examination, very small traces of specularite were noted on the outsides of all the eggs, but none contained this substance (cf. Humphreys 1974). This may be taken as an indication that the people who used and/or buried the eggs possessed specularite, which was used on the body for cosmetic and ritual purposes (eg. Bleek 1911). Fourteen of the eggs had mouths ground into the tapered end, while one had a hole in its side. Mouth diameters averaged 16 mm with a range between 13,0 and 17,1 mm. Several had been placed on their sides, and four with their openings facing downwards, yet all were very nearly (average 93%) full of sand. Rudner (1952), who describes an ostrich eggshell cache excavated north of Orlington, found all but one of the seven shells there to be full of sand. The empty egg had its mouth facing downwards, and she concluded that the sand, in that instance, had trickled into the eggs after burial. However, it is difficult to account for the Vaalbos case except by suggesting that they were already filled prior to burial. No trace of any plug, or resin, or beeswax around the mouths of the eggs (cf. Dunn 1931; Fisher 1953), was noted. Interestingly, along with the sand, small quantities of charred grass and burnt twigs (less than 1 g) were found inside the eggs. A most likely scenario is that the eggs were buried here for storage purposes for a projected return to the site. Perhaps they were filled with sand for strength in case of animals walking over them; and in the process charred material blown from a nearby hearth came to be included. A related ethnographic parallel for this is described by Vaal, observing behaviour at a succession of encampments in the Vaalbos region of Botswana, at one of which several items, including ostrich eggshells, were packed for a future return (Vaal 1977:162).

The condition of the eggshells suggests that they may not be more than a few hundred years old, while in areas of local hunting they are unlikely to date back less than about 100 years.

DISCUSSION

In the ethnography, ostrich eggshells feature principally as water containers used by hunter-gatherer groups (Marfat 1842; Shaw 1905; Bleek 1911; Donner 1923; Schneider 1931). Silberbauer (1981) notes that 70% encampments were seldom less than 1 km from any given water source, and eggshells were used for storing water to the camp (cf. Duggan-Turner & Bleek 1987: 41, 42). They were also used for water when out on foraging, and were, in the latter numbersense to be taken on the move. Marshall (1976: 107) also (1979) noted among the !Kung that married women had some five or ten eggs on behalf of each family or household. Animal skins or bladders were also fashioned into water containers, and it is

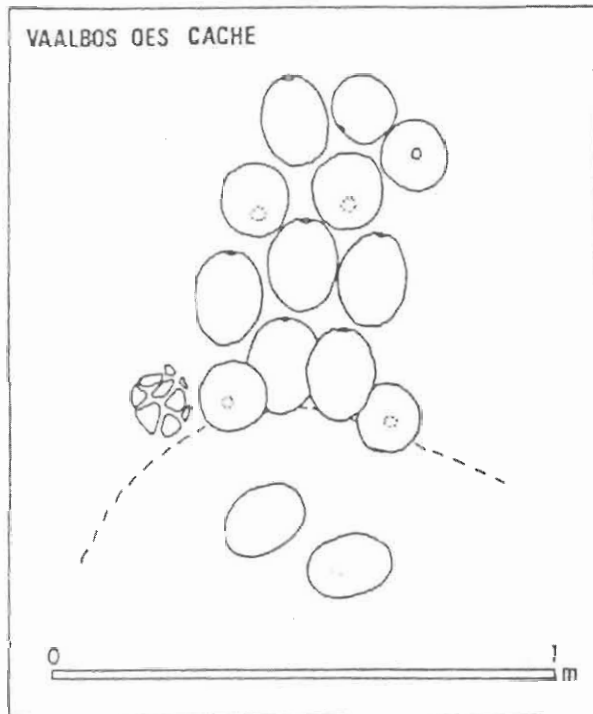


Figure 2. A plan of the cache with the dashed line indicating the edge of the exposure. Only one of the eggshells found in situ had an upward-facing mouth. The remainder either pointed downwards or were positioned on their sides. The latter all face south, but whether there is any significance in this is unknown.

were favoured by some groups on longer journeys (Silberbauer 1981:221). Lee cites a personal communication from Campbell that on occasion /Gwi buried several hundred eggs filled with water at a single locality in the rainy season for later dry season use (1979:123; cf. Schapera 1930:143). Dunn (1931:35) records from his Upper Karoo travels in the 1870s that, while on the move in that arid region, a Bushman would bury an eggshell water container at intervals of "about 20 miles...near some mark that he alone would recognise". In this way a supply would be ensured for his return. But eggs also served other purposes: for holding 'Bushman rice' (Bleek 1911:261); for food (Silberbauer 1981:216); for carrying and storing ostrich eggshell fragments for bead and pendant manufacture (Sandelowsky 1971); and for transporting and keeping supplies of specularite and ochre (Sandelowsky 1971; Huxhpreys 1974). One eggshell containing specularite was amongst grave goods recovered from a burial near Upington (Rudner 1971), indicating a ritual dimension to their use.

Eggs occur in clutches of 10-13 in ostrich nests (Lee 1979). Among the /Gwi, not more than two or three eggs were hatched per nest (Silberbauer 1981:216). The contents were a great delicacy, though Marshall has recorded an avoidance associated with them in that men and women from the age of puberty until they were old enough to have had five children, were not to partake of them (Marshall 1978:127; Biessele 1993:107). Dorothea Bleek noted among the Naron that they were given chiefly to old men to eat (1906:7). Supernatural potency ascribed to them (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989, relates to concepts of 'luck' or 'suitedness' among the Ju/'hoan (Biessele 1993). They believe that if a person who is 'lucky' with ostrich eggs eats them, rain will fall; but that, conversely, it will not rain if they are eaten by one for whom they are 'unlucky' or 'ill-suited' (op. cit. 107). Biessele further records a prohibition against tossing ostrich eggs, a taboo which applies to some other foods and objects as well.

Turning the eggshells into water containers was observed by Lee (1979:123) as they could hold an hour, and water would last some two years. Such flasks were sometimes decorated (Dunn 1931). Several examples of egg engravings among the /Gwi, like designs signified ownership, according to Marshall (1978:77), but Lee (1979:123) has denied this as the reason for decoration. Unlike the flasks excavated by Rudner (1971), none of the vaalbos eggs shows any sign of such markings, but a wide range of engraved motifs is known from egg fragments from archaeological sites not far from vaalbos (Huxhpreys & Thackeray 1981; Fig. 2).

It would indeed be interesting to determine more closely the motivations and meanings behind decorating water, given the avoidance and potency noted, and the use of the shells for carrying water; and given the social and religious significance of water over and above its very material centrality in the lives of people in this dry region (Hoernle 1920; Lewis-Williams 1978; Huxhpreys 1991). Both figurative and, in some instances, non-figurative designs occur (cf. Rudner 1971; Rudner 1971; Huxhpreys & Thackeray 1981). Ostrich eggs do have also to be used in ritual engravings, as does in association with decorations of Schapellions and Visag patterns (Pook & Pook 1969), and it is

feasible that the several dot-cluster engravings at the latter site (Morris & Fourshé 1993), while they might be construed as entoptics or indeed be a conflation of entoptic and iconic forms (Dowson 1989), could well be further examples.

CONCLUSION

There remain questions for which the Vaalbos cache provides no answers. Apart from those raised in the above discussion, there is no way of telling more closely the identity of its owners, what became of them, or what it was that led to this particular cache being lost or abandoned in the sand. But the find is an interesting example from a category of archaeological sites that all too often have been destroyed before there has been a chance to describe them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

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