

University
of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg



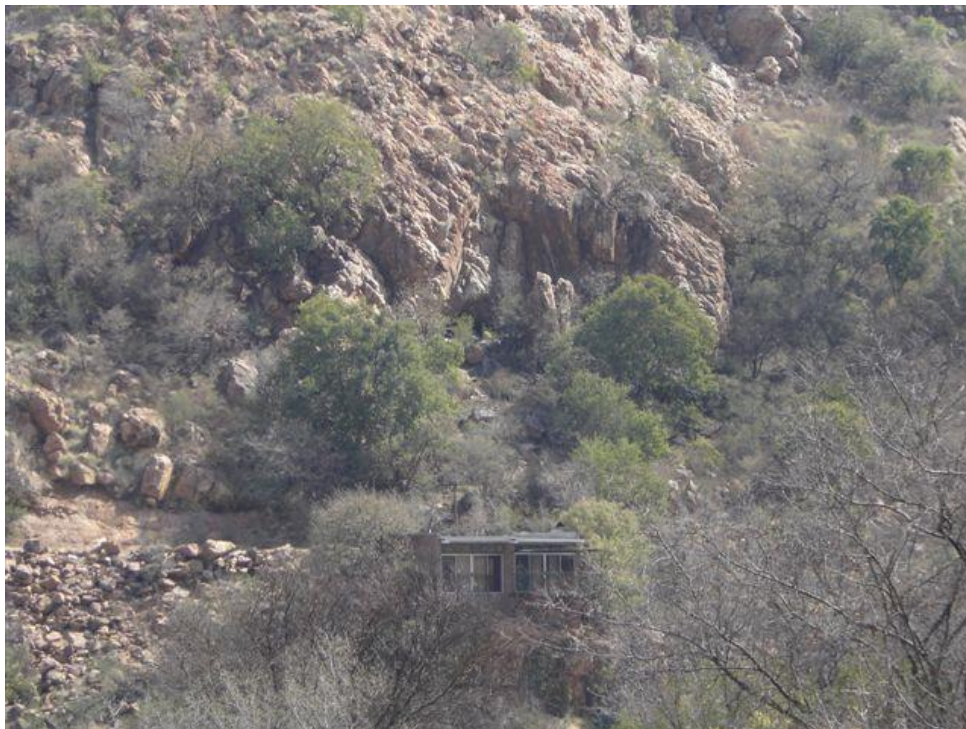
School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies

Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa Enquiries: GEOGRAPHY: TEL: +27 11 717-6503 • Fax: +27 11 403-7281
ARCHAEOLOGY: TEL: +27 11 717-6045 • Fax: +27 11 339-1620

Report on the
Archaeological Excavations at
Holkrans Rock Shelter, Vredefort Dome, North West Province

Wits University Archaeology Field School

September 2013



Principal Investigator and Field Director
Prof. Karim Sadr

INTRODUCTION

For four days in early September 2013, twelve Archaeology undergraduates and four postgraduate teaching assistants from the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand carried out archaeological excavations at the rock shelter Holkrans (BFK 1) on the property Thabela Thabeng, part of the original farm Buffelskloof 511 IQ, Potchefstroom District, on the North West Province side of the Vredefort Dome (Fig. 1). The work was carried out with the kind permission of the landowner. Governmental permission to excavate at the rock shelter was granted by SAHRA through permit number 9/2/256/0047, Case ID: 4349; Permit ID: 1282.

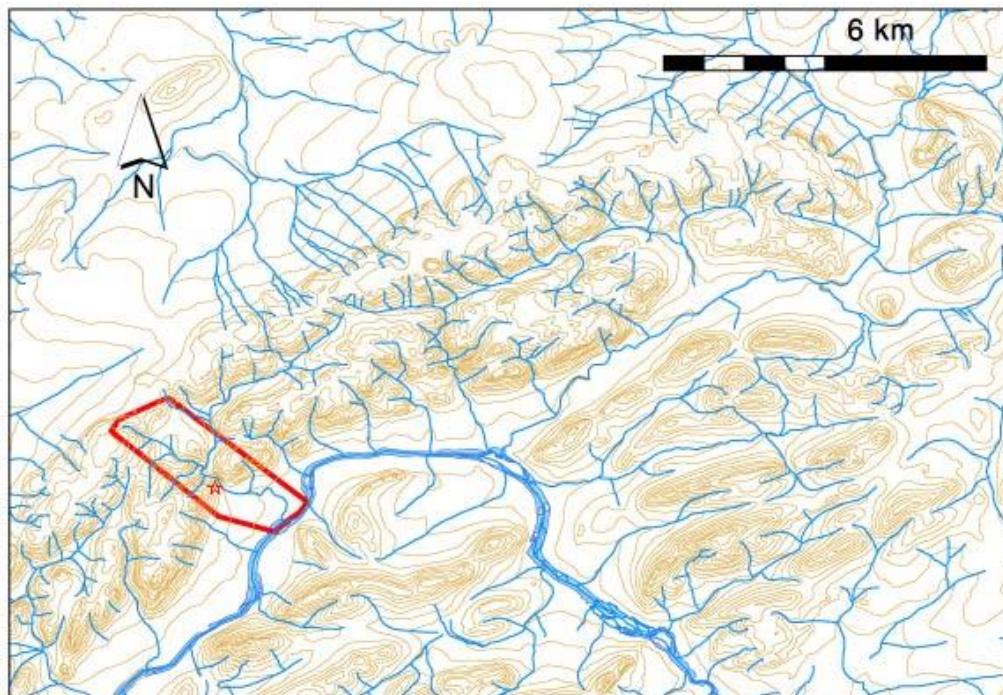


Fig.1. Thabela Thabeng outlined in red. Holkrans indicated by small red star.

SETTING

The Vredefort Dome was formed by the largest and second oldest known meteorite impact (Reimold & Gibson 2005). Much later, the Vaal River cut its bed through the Dome. Buffelskloof is one of its tributaries and drains part of the outer rim of the Dome bergland into the Vaal River. The property Thabela

Thabeng forms a rectangle extending from the River to the last hilltops of the bergland before these give way to the plains of Potchefstroom (Fig. 1).

The centre of the dome impact structure is flat farmland, contrasting markedly with the arc of steeply folded hills of the Witwatersrand Supergroup. The vegetation in the hilly zone is classified as 'Bankenveld' and is well wooded with *Acacia karoo*, *A. caffra*, *Celtis krussian*, *Rhus lanceolata*, *Zizyphus mucronat*, *Protea caffra*. The dominant grasses are *Eragrostis chalantha*, *Digitaria triholaenoides*, *Setaria flabellate*, *Heteropogon contortus* (Balkwill 2005). Rainfall is 570–650 mm pa, with most of it falling from October to March. Drainage at Thabela Thabeng is largely from Northwest to Southeast, from the watershed to the Vaal River.

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

In 1979, Michael Taylor presented a Masters Thesis on stone walled ruins in the Vredefort Dome. He filled a gap between two major reconnaissance projects on these pre-colonial settlements: the one by Mason (1968) to the North of the Vaal and the one by Maggs (1976) to the South. Specifically, Taylor aimed to establish the archaeological sequence of the last 500 years in the area. More recently, Anton Pelsler (2003) presented a Masters Thesis on the excavation of a major stone walled settlement area at Askoppies. His aims were to describe aspects of the local economy from a domestic and settlement perspective. The SAHRA cultural heritage survey and management plan for the Vredefort Dome (Bakker *et al.* 2004) lists all the known archaeological sites in this area and grades them according to their apparent significance. On Buffelskloof 511 IQ, Holkrans rock shelter is graded III and considered of medium significance. Most recently, Nkhasi-Lesaoana (2008) has completed a survey of the stone walled enclosures in the Vredefort Dome using aerial photographs. Stephen Banhegyi (2011) completed a BSc Honours research report on some of the lithics from Holkrans, while Makhosazana Mngomezulu (2011) wrote a BSc Honours research report on the pottery from Holkrans. Joe Byrne (2012) has completed a Masters Thesis on the stone-walled structures in the Buffelskloof. A paper has been published on the stone arrowhead from Holkrans (Bradfield & Sadr 2011).

THE EXCAVATION AT HOLKRANS (BFK1)

Situated about 20 m above the vehicle track leading to the Thabela Thabeng chalets, there is a small rock shelter with a scatter of Later Stone Age artefacts and animal bones in front and down slope to the track (see Fig. 1 and 2, as well as the cover image of this report). The soil is dark and organic. There are many loose rocks fallen from the cliff face. The small shelter's floor is now covered with a thick layer of Hyrax dung. Across the opening of the shelter and more or less following the drip line, an alignment of stones creates a short barrier (Fig. 2). The ground immediately outside the shelter is flat for a few meters before it drops rapidly down slope. A terracing wall is responsible for the formation of the flat area in front of the cave. The retaining wall of the terrace is partly man-made. The age and origins of these two architectural features, the wall and the terrace, is a principal subject of investigation in our excavations. They may have been built by the LSA occupants of the shelter, and excavations are attempting to clarify this. The wall is probably meant for keeping livestock in the shelter.

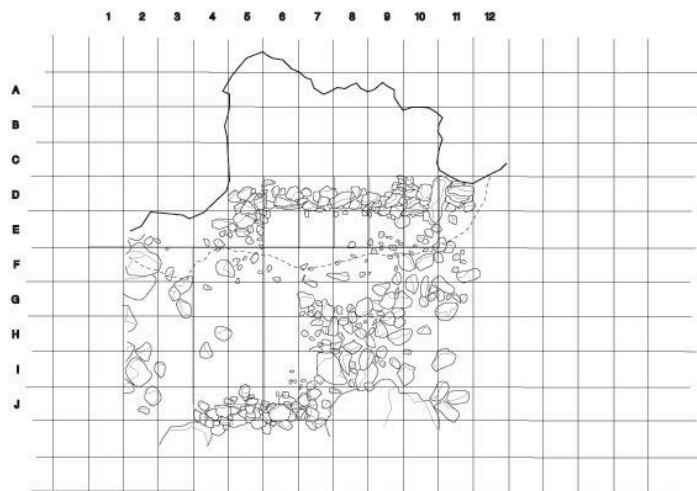


Fig. 2. Plan of shelter BFK1 showing alphanumeric grid and rocks.

In 2013, spits 14-16 in square E8 and spits 10-15 in square E7 were excavated, following the excavation technique described by Sampson *et al.* (1989). The aim was to continue digging these squares until eventually we reach bedrock. All these spits are in the preceramic period of occupation here and the dig yielded the usual finds of LSA stone tools, bone as well as some botanical materials including charcoal. The excavated material was sorted,

counted and weighed in the field. No further analysis has been done on the material. No samples were submitted for dating.



Fig. 3. Excavation in progress.

CONCLUSION

The excavation at Holkrans is part of a field school designed to provide students with some of the basic field skills of archaeological research. It is hoped that in the years to come an able postgraduate student will take on the task of analysing and writing up the Holkrans materials as an MSc or PhD project. Until then, we plan to slowly excavate in squares E7 and E8 until we reach bedrock.

REFERENCES

- Bakker, K. Naude, M., Clarke, N., van Schalkwyk, J., van Vuuren C. & van Zyl, C. 2004. Vredefort Dome Cultural Heritage Survey and Conservation Management Plan. SAHRA unpublished report.
- Balkwill, K. 2005. Trees and plants of the Vredefort Dome: what, where and why? In: Reimold, U. & Gibson, R. (eds) *Meteorite Impact! The Danger from Space and South Africa's Mega-Impact, the Vredefort Structure*. Second edition. Johannesburg: Chris van Rensburg.

- Banhegyi, S. 2011. Frequency distributions of stone artefacts from Holkrans, North West Province, South Africa. BSc Honours Research Report, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Bradfield, J. & Sadr, K. 2011. Stone arrowheads from Holkrans, North West Province, South Africa. *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 66 (193): 77–88.
- Byrne, P.J. 2012. A Landscape Approach to the Archaeology of the Vredefort Dome. MSc Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Maggs, T. O'C. 1976. Iron Age Communities of the Southern Highveld. Pietermaritzburg: Council of the Natal Museum.
- Mason, R.J. 1968. Transvaal and Natal Iron Age settlement revealed by aerial photography and excavation. *African Studies* 27(4): 167-180.
- Mngomezulu, M. 2011. Morphological analysis of thin walled pottery at Holkrans, North West Province, South Africa. BSc Honours Research Report, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Nkhasi-Lesaoana, M.E. 2008. Aerial photographic survey of the Vredefort Dome. *Position/IT* Nov/Dec 2008: 18–21.
- Pelser, A. 2003. Askoppies: Late Iron Age Sotho-Tswana settlement on the Vredefort Dome. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Reimold, U. & Gibson, R. 2005. Meteorite Impact! The Danger from Space and South Africa's Mega-Impact, the Vredefort Structure. Second edition. Johannesburg: Chris van Rensburg.
- Sampson, C.G., Hart, T.J.G., Wallsmith, D. & Blagg, J.D. 1989. The ceramic sequence in the upper Seacow valley: problems and implications. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 44:3-16.
- Taylor, M.O.V. 1979. Late Iron Age settlements on the northern edge of the Vredefort Dome. MA Thesis in Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand.