

Waterberg area: Archaeology & History

Hundrede kilometre east of Shakati, near Mokopane, is one of the world's most important archaeological sites: Makapansgat. There, in a deep and large limestone cave, have been found the remains of some of the earliest hominids yet identified, the species *Australopithecus africanus*, who lived more than three million years ago; and also *Homo erectus*, who lived a million years ago. In their recent book on The Waterberg, Taylor, Hinde and Holt-Biddle (2003) comment that *"the australopithecines probably lived in small bands that wandered through the region following the seasonal abundance of foodstuffs such as insects, termites ... as well as the leaves, fruits and flowers of bushes and trees. They may well have found their way into the lower valleys of the Waterberg. Later tool users such as Homo erectus may well have moved purposely into the Waterberg in summer to follow the prey animals they hunted"*. Although no evidence of the presence of these **Early Stone Age** (ESA) ancestors has yet been discovered on the Waterberg plateau, it is likely that they at least visited the region.

The first firm evidence of hominid habitation relates to people of the **Middle Stone Age** (MSA). There are extensive remains of MSA occupations in the Waterberg; until specific research is conducted in the Waterberg it will not be possible to know precisely when the Waterberg MSA occupations occurred and at present we can only say that the occupations would have been somewhere between 200 000 and 25 000 years ago. People living in the MSA lived in open camps, sometimes near pans, lakes or rivers, though they were not as dependent on close sources of water as their ancestral ESA counterparts. This independence from water suggests that they had water containers that could have been made of skin or ostrich egg. People in the MSA were fairly efficient hunters and gatherers. They hunted with spears tipped with stone. We know this because some South African sites like Klasies River Mouth (near Storms River) had stone spear-tips embedded in animal bones (Deacon & Deacon 1999; Mitchell 2002). In addition, researchers have found microscopic traces of blood and animal remains on stone points (Williamson 2000). Stone points were hafted onto handles because residue analysis has traced resins on their bases, in addition to micro-chipping where twine would have been used to attach the stones to shafts (Wadley *et al.* 2004).

In the MSA, people were active hunters of large game, though they would also have scavenged opportunistically. At sites where the remains of bones from their hunts have been found, these bones include many eland, zebra, hartebeest, wildebeest, warthog and kudu (Deacon & Deacon 1999; Wadley 2001). The bones were invariably burnt and smashed to extract marrow. Many MSA sites have good evidence for control of fire; fireplaces and ash lenses are present particularly in rock shelter sites where organic preservation is good. Prior to control of fire, rock shelters and caves would have been too dangerous for human habitation; they would have been predator lairs.

In the MSA, people made a wide range of stone tools from both coarse- and fine-grained rock types. Sometimes the rocks used for tools were transported considerable distances, presumably in bags or other containers. When this happened, the stone tool 'knappers' generally carried out part of the manufacturing process at the rock source. Thus tool assemblages from some MSA sites tend to lack some of the preliminary cores and contain predominantly

finished products like flakes and retouched pieces. The most characteristic retouched tool type is the point, a triangular tool thought to have been a spearhead, but scrapers and knife-like cutting tools are also common.

There is a noticeable gap in the Waterberg between these early tool types of the MSA and younger ones of **Later Stone Age** (LSA) origin, leading to the conclusion that the Waterberg may have been without

human life for tens of thousands of years. Numerous LSA sites have been discovered and excavated on the plateau, most of them in shelters overlooking, or at least close to, the Lephalala River. A well known site lie on the eastern slopes of Tafelkop, and were excavated by Maria van der Ryst of UNISA in the 1990s. Her research concluded that, after a hiatus following Middle Stone Age habitation, LSA occupation in the north-western portion of the Waterberg commenced *“only during the late eleventh/beginning of the twelfth century AD. It would seem that the main period of semi-permanent settlement of the Waterberg plateau by hunter-gatherers corresponds to the movement of Iron Age agropastoralists into this area”* (Van der Ryst, 1998).

This joint immigration of farmers and hunter-gatherers seems counter-intuitive, but it is likely that the hunter-gatherers followed the farmers because they hoped to benefit from exchange of services for food and useful items such as clay pots and metal tools. LSA communities appear to have subsisted on the gathering of plant foods and on the hunting of small and medium-sized animals such as duiker, hare and tortoise, although the reports of early European visitors to the region refer to hunter-gatherer communities following the movement of larger migratory game.

It is interesting to consider why the Waterberg would have been attractive for settlement only after about 1000 AD. One hypothesis, which remains to be tested in the area with palaeo-environmental studies, (but which is securely recorded further north at Mapungubwe, on the Limpopo), is that it was very wet at and before 1000 AD. The drying out of the environment after 1000 AD would have made the Waterberg more suitable for occupation because it would have reduced the amount of sour veld and encouraged the growth of palatable grasses. In turn pasture improvement would have provided better winter feed for wild and domestic animals.

Aukema (1989) distinguished at least three phases of Iron Age occupation in the Waterberg. The first phase, called the Eiland tradition, contains herringbone decoration on pottery,. The Eiland is probably the final stage of the Early Iron Age and it has been dated between the 11. and 13. centuries AD. It is not associated with stone-walled settlements and it is most often found in areas of good agricultural potential, where soil is deep. In contrast, the Late Iron Age settlements of the second phase of occupation are found on hilltops and they have stone walled settlements and undecorated pottery. These settlements may be linked to the arrival of Nguni-speakers (Ndebele people) in the region, that is, between the 16. and 17. centuries AD. A good example can be seen at Melora, in the Lapalala Wilderness. Here, dry stone walling encloses an area of some six hectares on a hilltop to form what is interpreted to have been a defensive position, although there are also remains of hut dwellings outside the enclosure.

At its peak, the site may have accommodated up to a thousand people. The third phase of Iron Age settlement, dating to the 18. and early 19. century, contains multichrome (red and black) Moloko pottery, believed to have been made by Sotho-Tswana.

Aukema (1989) mentioned rain-making ceremonies in rock shelters in the Waterberg. The shelters themselves do not seem to have been occupied yet they contain clay pots, stone cairns and grindstones. Rock paintings are also often associated with rain-making sites and the association of Iron Age pottery and paintings implies a relationship between the rain-making rituals of the Bushmen and those of the Iron Age farmers of the area. The initial stages of contact between Bushman and black Iron Age farmers appears to have been co-operative and Bushman made rain and prepared animal skins for the farmers in exchange for a variety of items, including livestock and carbohydrates (Wadley 1996).

When land and resources became scarce, with the arrival of large-scale Late Iron Age communities in the eighteenth century, tensions arose between the hunter-gatherers and farmers. The hunting and gathering

way of life was essentially displaced; some Bushmen would have fled north or west, but there was also considerable miscegenation. From this time forward Iron Age farmers may have conducted most of their own rain-making ceremonies, even though they may have continued to revere and utilize painted shelters, or shelters that were close to painted sites. Iron Age people even began to paint depictions of animals for themselves. Rather crude depictions in red or white paint (sometimes black), painted directly with fingers, are often found at the same Waterberg sites as the more “refined” Bushman paintings (Van der Ryst 1998). Unfortunately, we do not have any painted shelters on Shakati.

Throughout South Africa there are historic records of Bushmen used as rain makers by both black and white farmers (Macquarrie 1962, Jolly 1992) and supernatural powers have long been attributed to Bushmen. All over southern Africa the Bushmen were used as shamans, even in recent times. Their services were also used for the provision of meat, skins, berries, firewood and ostrich eggshell beads and there are records of them receiving food or livestock in return for their labour. Bushmen were “clients” rather than servants of the people they worked for. They would seasonally or irregularly “disappear” into the veld, cutting off their ties with the settled farmers. On their return they would generally camp on the outskirts of the settlements that they planned to associate with.

The German missionary Schlömann (1886), who worked among the Seleka (who spoke Tswana) of the Waterberg, visited a rock shelter of ritual importance close to the Lephalala river, near a mission station called Pusompe. The rock shelter was in use by the “Masele”, also known as “Vaalpense” (people of mixed Bushman and Black descent). The “Masele” were reported to have used the rock shelter for various rituals, including rain-making (Van der Ryst 1998). When the chief’s rain-making magic failed he would take his people to the painted shelter where they prayed for rain. Van der Ryst was told by a local resident that 50 years earlier when he was a child people had prayed for rain at the rock painting site on the farm New Belgium, near Dorset, (west of the modern tar road). People apparently called the shelter the “reënkerk”. Rain making ceremonies in the Waterberg are also mentioned by Eugene Marais in his book “Dwaalstories” (Marais, 1964).

To the early white migrants from the south, the Waterberg was considered remote and inaccessible, with the result that apart from a number of hunting and trading expeditions into the region during the nineteenth century, it was largely immune from white settlement until early in the twentieth century. Taylor et al (2003) provide a good summary of the migration of the Voortrekkers across the Springbok Flats to Nylstroom (now Modimolle) and beyond during the 1840s, including the tragic events of Makapansgat, where, in September 1854, Chief Makapane and over 1 500 of his people died of hunger, dehydration and injuries after being besieged in the cave by a boer commando in retaliation for an attack on a Voortrekker settlement.

The farms in the Waterberg area were in general surveyed in the late 1860s as part of the Transvaal government’s strategy to settle white farmers in the Waterberg region. At that time, access to the Waterberg plateau (or Limpopo Highlands as the area was marked on some maps) was circuitous and difficult. The shortest route was via Sandrivierspoort near present-day Vaalwater, and that could be more than three days’ hard trekking from Nylstroom. A longstanding resident of the Waterberg foothills, Lex Rodger, wrote in his memoirs, that *“it was not long before one of the early farmers got impatient with the long detour to Nylstroom and decided, almost lone-handed, to make a shorter road down the mountains via Heuningfontein ... that would cut the length of the journey by half. This soon became a well-used road and was given the unusual name of Tarentaalstraat. I imagined it was so-called because of the plentiful guineafowl in those hills, [but] I have since been told that the fellow who first pioneered the new road had the nickname ‘tarentaal’ because his face was spotted rather like a guineafowl feather!”*

One of the early settler families along the Waterberg foothills was the Van Rooyen clan. The van Rooyens had something of a mixed reputation in the district, but are perhaps best remembered for their long association with the Afrikaans poet and writer, Eugene Marais, who lived with Tant Anna and Oom Gys on their farm Rietfontein near Naboomspruit (now Mookopong) for eight years from 1908. One of Marais's greatest friends at that time was their son, Hans "Purekrans" van Rooyen, (Rousseau, 1999), who had a farm on the edge of the plateau, at the top of Bokpoort Pass. According to Lex Rodger, the van Rooyens discovered on arrival in the area in 1893 that the plateau was inhabited by the "Buys people", a half caste community descended from Coenrad Buys, a Boer renegade, and which had been forced to take refuge in the Hanglip mountains after being driven out of the Warmbaths (Bela-Bela) area. Purekrans van Rooyen set about evicting the group, which fled down a pass, now called Basterspad, to a new home in the Zoutpansberg, where their descendents live to this day.

After the railway line to Vaalwater was completed in the 1920s, maize became an economically viable crop, and large silos were built in the town. The earliest aerial photographs of the Waterberg were only taken in 1955, by which time many flat-lying parts of the farm – and others in the area - had been converted to the cultivation of maize and groundnuts. In the 1950s and early 60s, crop farming was generally very profitable – possibly due in part to governmental subsidies – with the result that areas inherently unsuited to this activity were developed nevertheless. By the end of the 1960s, slumps in the prices of both crops resulted in many farmers abandoning crop farming in favour of cattle; while other properties simply became dormant. The rise of eco-tourism and the interest of foreigners in acquiring 'cheap' land for hunting and game viewing over the last decade has led to a recent revival of property prices in the Waterberg and a sharp growth in game ranching activities. The area, however, remains well known for its stud cattle breeding.

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