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THE 'MFECCANE' AFTERMATH

towards a new paradigm

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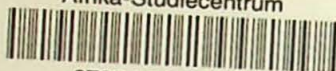
'DIFAQANE' CAVERNS:

A preliminary assesement of age, content and structure

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Introduction

Lepalong is a Tswana name, recounted in oral records collected by Breutz (1953) for a large cavern system in the vicinity of Carltonville and Potchefstroom. Lepalong was an extreme choice for a home, made, so the oral records say, by displaced BaKwena people who had fled southwards away from Mzilikazi. This site was occupied between 1827 and 1836 and the record of that occupation is preserved in the substantial remains of what must have been a complete underground village. The value of this archaeological site is that it provides a record of social history and evidence for one kind of strategic response to the strife of that period which, in the shifting matrix of difaqane historiography, provides a concrete expression of life on the ground.

Cobbings' critique of settler 'alibi' historiography and liberal interpretations of the difiqane locates causality for this strife and turmoil away from purely internal African agency and exposes the potential role of Imperial Europe and its slaving agents (Cobbing 1988, 1990). Central to his critique is a

demythologising of the role of the Zulu Kingdom as the prime catalyst and epicentre from which all disruption and turmoil ultimately emanated. It may be that Cobbings' analysis has swung the historiographic pendulum rather violently, and detailed regional investigations may find his general hypotheses out of step with evidence. It is the general aim of this paper to introduce archaeological material into the difiqane debate as an additional source from which a more detailed history for the period may be constructed. Cobbings' analyses extend the range of possibilities for assessing the archaeological evidence as it currently exists and as more comes to hand.

It seems that the present archaeological data contributes to a history of the difaqane in two ways. Firstly, and in the case of the western Transvaal, it helps untangle multiple causes by pointing out relationships between changes within Sotho-Tswana settlements during the late 18th century and an expanding Northern Cape frontier as well as other tension (Huffman 1986). By looking back further in time through the archaeological record at these changes, the explanatory focus for them can, in part, be more specifically located and moved away from Natal and the east coast. Secondly, whatever the causes, individual archaeological sites such as Lepalong provide the detail of African strategic responses to strife; responses which are locally evolved. Primary documents on the whole do not record the necessary detail and consequently, archaeology provides an alternative source for constructing that uniqueness. This perspective may be lost by working through a predominantly white written record. The

archaeological record, by its very nature, focuses attention on the texture of the African experience of that period.

In the rest of this paper I discuss Iron Age data from both pre-written and written contexts that is relevant to a wider view of the period. I follow a chronological progression starting in about AD1650, then move to the 18th century and end by looking specifically at archaeological material in the written context of the 19th century. This temporal transect spans the methodological transition from 'prehistoric' archaeology - that period which for most of the Transvaal can only be accessed through the study of material culture, through to historical archaeology, which seeks to effectively combine archaeological materials with written sources. Such an approach can be powerful because of its potential to command several domains of human behaviour (Schuyler 1977; Deagan 1982). Preserved behaviour (archaeological materials) can be combined with the written word, with the spoken word and even with observed behaviour (ethnography). The simultaneous use of written documents and archaeological data allows direct correlation of specific event and context with archaeological pattern. In this regard, historical archaeology is not simply a 'handmaiden to history' but can play the role of critical foil and spoiler for the documents. "Archaeology interprets the document *and* the document interprets archaeology." (Hall, M. 1991:2).

Archaeological indicators for stress: settlement change

The time depth provided for the Iron Age by the archaeological record in the western Transvaal indicates that strife and stress was not confined to the early 19th century period of the difaqane. A brief examination of some archaeological evidence for pre-difaqane Iron Age social and economic stress helps put the scale of Late Iron Age reaction in the late 18th and 19th centuries in perspective. Three strategies are visible in the archaeological record. These are hilltop defensive settlement locations, the aggregation of communities into larger towns and the use of underground cavern systems such as Lepalong.

Within the Late Iron Age, from about AD1600 onwards, Sotho-Tswana settlements in the Transvaal, Orange Free State and Botswana are easily located and identified because enclosures for cattle byres and huts were built from stone (Hall, S. 1985; Loubser 1981, 1985; Maggs 1976; Mason 1968, 1986; Taylor 1979).

In the Waterberg of the central-west Transvaal, Late Iron Age stone wall sites built by Sotho-Tswana speakers (radiocarbon dated to AD 1650) were built in easily defended hilltop positions (Hall, S. 1985). This defensive concern is directly reflected in the analysis of bone food waste, particularly from the site of Rooikrans in the Waterberg, which has the lowest frequencies of cattle recorded for Late Iron Age sites (Plug 1981). Although speculative, the defensive settlement strategy at this time may

have been a response to increased raiding between communities, in which cattle numbers among raided people declined. The stock enclosures at Rooikrans are small and suggest that they may have in fact only been used for sheep and goats.

More recent work in the Waterberg by Aukema (reported in Huffman 1990) provides a specific context for these Sotho-Tswana settlement patterns. Also at AD1650, there was an inflow of new people into the Waterberg. This event can be recognised by the appearance of markedly different settlement layouts, house form and material culture. These new migrants are identified as an early movement of Nguni speaking 'Ndebele'. Independent genealogical extrapolation of the Langa by Jackson (1983) gives a similar date. Two examples of these Ndebele sites (Molore and Ndorobe within the Laphalala drainage) were built on top of extremely steep-sided hills, which must have been a defensive reaction to already established Sotho-Tswana Iron Age communities in the region. This defensive posture against regional insecurity was strengthened by the aggregation of people into larger settlements enclosed by stone walls. The combination of hill top settlement with aggregation also occurred in the late 19th century. In the southern Waterberg the 1870 to 1880 Sotho/Ndebele site of KwaMakapan is a good example.

The Waterberg 17th century aggregation response is of a much lower order in comparison to the "anomalously large" populations observed in historic Sotho-Tswana towns (Huffman 1986). The chronology of Sotho-Tswana aggregation is critical in the context of the difaqane in the area. Prior to the 18th century, Sotho-

Tswana sites in the Vredefort Dome region were single homestead units (Huffman 1986; Taylor 1979) and small relative to the historically well known Tlaping town of Dithakong and the Hurutshe capital of Kaditshwene, visited by both Burchell (1953) and Campbell (1822). Radiocarbon dates from a similar 18th century 'megashite' at Olifantspoort in the present day Rustenburg area indicate that although the site was first occupied in the 16th century (Mason 1986), the largescale increase in the size of the site occurred in the 18th century, perhaps from AD1750 onwards (Huffman 1986).

The large size of Sotho-Tswana towns contrast markedly with the dispersed homesteads of Nguni speakers. Traditional explanations have emphasised environmental conditions and cultural preference, to name two. Environmental determinism can be discounted because the arid areas such as Botswana and the western Transvaal contain the remains of dispersed homesteads dating throughout the Iron Age, whereas the large settlements are a recent phenomena. Some of these dispersed sites were inhabited by Sotho-Tswana speakers, and therefore cultural preference could also not have caused aggregation (Denbow 1982, 1983; Huffman 1986). Similarly, social stratification can be discounted because prior to the growth of urban centers the general pattern of social stratification was the same among Nguni and Sotho speakers.

If the timing of Sotho-Tswana aggregation suggested by the archaeology is correct then an alternative explanation can be suggested. The fact that most of these aggregated towns were also built on hill tops strengthens a defensive hypothesis. It

is possible that this response was locally generated through competition between Tswana chiefdoms for a slice of the growing European trade market (Manson 1991:3, this conference). If so, one would expect to find the reciprocal goods accruing from this trade such as glass beads. Excavations in the late 18th century deposits at Oliphantspoort yielded "a mere 11 glass beads" and no other trade goods from 83 huts and 15 ash middens (Mason 1986:438). Further excavations by Mason at the 18th century site of Platberg further to the south produced no beads at all.

A second factor in the defensive Sotho-Tswana aggregation may have been the increasing threat from the Northern Cape of armed and mounted Griqua and Korana raiders. Manson (1991, conference paper), points out, however that Conrad Buys only penetrated the western Transvaal in 1815. This does not rule out more subtle pressures due to the expansion of the Northern Cape frontier and the effect of compressing people on the landscape. A third factor is the possible interplay between the introduction of maize in the second half of the 18th century and a decrease in rainfall at the end of the century (see Hall, M. 1976; Maggs, 1982). Fluctuations in maize production may have contributed to stress both through late 18th century demographic expansion as well as food shortages.

As already mentioned, the timing of Sotho-Tswana aggregation is important if the explanatory potential of alternative causes are to be fully assessed. More archaeological work is required on the chronology in order to refine the suggested correlations.

The archaeology record demonstrates that the combination of aggregation and hill top sites has been a regular part of African responses to extreme social tension. Consequently Sotho-Tswana aggregation in the 18th century could also be due to local African agencies.

Archaeological indicators for stress: Lepalong

There are a limited number of cavern systems in the Transvaal and elsewhere which hold evidence of Iron Age occupation. Cavern occupation indicates that the 'choice' to use them was made under extreme duress. This option is completely atypical of normal settlement preferences. The Boer siege in 1854 of an Ndebele/Sotho group in the Makapansgat Valley is the best known example (Hofmeyr 1989). Other less well documented occupations exist in the Dwarsberge and at Gatkop in the southern Waterberg (see Teichler 1973; Hall, S. 1985).

The chronological resolution of the Lepalong occupation is established through oral histories collected by Breutz (1953). These records date the occupation of the cavern and identify the occupants and their place of origin before moving to the Lepalong area. They also provide a contextual backdrop against which some of the archaeology can be interpreted. The BaKwena ba Modimosana ba Mmatau under Maselwane moved to the area in 1827 from the Rustenburg area seeking refuge from Mzilikazi who had moved into the western Transvaal in the late 1820's. Maselwane's

relationship with the Ndebele seems to have been equivocal. According to the records, he returned northwards for an undisclosed reason, but again moved back to Gatsrand (Lepalong) after narrowly avoiding a trap laid by Mzilikazi. On his way south Maselwane raided some Ndebele cattle, and pursued by Mzilikazi, he had to move further off down into the present day Orange Free State. Here he met Boer Trekkers under the leadership of Potgieter and became known to them as Selon. He joined with Potgieter and guided him to Mzilikazi, who was defeated at Vegkop in 1836.

Maselwane's occupation of Lepalong is more explicitly mentioned in the oral records of another BaKwena group. The Baphiring under Mabalane left the Zwartruggens area, again because of harassment by Mzilikazi. As with Maselwane, the Baphiring appear to have had an on-off relationship with Mzilikazi. Before 1836, Mabalane returned to the Marico district, where they became subjects of Mzilikazi and were entrusted with some of his cattle and sheep herds. When Mzilikazi was under threat from both Boer Trekkers and Dingane, the Baphiring again left and moved south to Lepalong. Here they found the cavern already occupied by Maselwane's people, who nevertheless allowed them to use the cavern as well. The Baphiring records give the only detail concerning the actual caverns. The informants told Breutz that the only way to gain access to the cavern system was with ladders, which were removed if the "enemy appeared" (Breutz 1953:219).

These records depict Mzilikazi as the specific agent responsible

for the BaKwena occupation of Lepalong. One can detect though, an ambiguous tone in the records; that of "formidable local raiders..." and "a haven for refugees" (Cobbing 1990:7). The reference to the occupation of the Lepalong cavern, however, provides a specific agency and it is against this background that the archaeology must be compared.

Lepalong is made up of two physically separate parts; one above ground and the other in the cavern system. The relationship between the two is discussed at the end of this section. No excavation has yet been undertaken at either component and therefore statements are at best tentative and preliminary. Complete mapping of the above ground site has been completed and mapping of the below ground component is underway. Parts of the underground site are extremely well preserved, and a major concern is to make a record of the site before further deterioration takes place. A descriptive report on the site has been published (Haughton and Wells 1942), and it was declared a National Monument in 1964.

The above ground site runs for about 200m in a north/south direction and is 150m across at its widest point (Fig. 1). The site is composed of 47 hut floors, some of which are directly associated with a few small stock byres. The two larger stone wall byres at Lepalong are probably not associated with the rest of the site. Some square walls also occur in this area and appear to be associated with a 1930's settlement to the north-west. The hut floors next to these larger kraals are anomalously close and are disturbed, perhaps due to the later occupation.

The hut floors can be identified because of upright slate foundation stones arranged in circles of no more than 3m in diameter. The entrances and hence orientations of the huts are marked by a break in the foundation stones as well as larger upright monoliths on either side of the door. In some cases there are smoothed slabs at the foot of the doorway, which is evidence that a sliding door arrangement was in use, which is similar to Late Iron Age sites in the Magaliesberg (Mason 1986).

Spatial organization among Bantu speakers in southern Africa is a metaphor for economic, political, religious and status values (Evers, 1984; Huffman, 1982; Kuper, 1982). Comparison between this ideal settlement pattern and Lepalong indicates some differences. I illustrate this at the macro level of the site and focus on only one aspect of settlement organisation. Cattle byres are the central focus of a settlement, with huts built in an arc or circle around the byre. Rank is expressed through the position of huts, and the location of the senior man's house, often the highest point, defines the back of the homestead while cattle will be brought into the byre from the front (Fig. 2). The centrality of the byres reflects the importance of cattle as the medium through which a man accumulates wives and children and through which he may invoke his ancestors. The byre is a male space; men are buried there (see Mason 1986) and it may also serve as the court. Alternatively, the court is positioned next to the byre but below the senior man's house.

The Lepalong site plan above ground is not tightly organised around a central byre (compare Fig 1 with Figs 2 & 3). If cattle numbers are low or even absent, there would have been little purpose in constructing the pre-19th century pattern. A few huts may belong to clusters around the small stock enclosures. Other huts such as those at the southern end of the site are isolated outliers and are not associated with either kraals or other huts, while the linear straggle of huts on the eastern edge of the site only links loosely with byres in that region. There is nothing at the site which identifies front or back and certainly no obvious indication as to where the senior man lived. While it is obvious to link a break down or minimising of the normal pattern to the stress of the period, other more practical factors may also be important. One could be that cattle herds were not kept at the site. A better defensive strategy may have been to kraal them on hill top stock posts elsewhere or even move them regularly.

A comparison with excavated huts from Platberg, an 18th century (Rolong?) site in the south-western Transvaal (Fig. 4) shows that the huts at Lepalong are also a minimal domestic unit. There are no enclosing walls behind the huts, no front courtyard and no kitchen area. Physically defined space has been pruned to a minimum. It may be that at the domestic scale of spatial organisation, there is more visible structure in the cavern itself.

The above ground portion is directly associated with the cavern

entrance (Fig. 1). The cavern entrance is a 5 by 2 meter fissure in the ground and provides the only access to the underground site. As the oral records indicate, ladders are needed to enter the cavern. The main part of the cavern is a long solution cavity with other chambers running off it. Over 70 stone and daub huts are preserved. The walls were built to a maximum height of about 1,5 meters and were not roofed. Very little of the cavern floor was not used and the back of the huts often incorporated the sides of the cavern. Construction also includes features such as internal and external benches, platforms and steps as well as low walls which may have functioned as dykes for water control. Wood and thatch fences are indicated by post holes and in some of the deeper sub-chambers sheep and goat kraals were built. A sump at the end of the main chamber retains a continuous pool of water.

Clearly, the restraint on space makes the search for macro settlement organisation in terms of center and surround a meaningless exercise. Considerable structure is evident, however, at the level of linked hut clusters and low walls. These features separate private space from well defined public walkways that provide access through the clusters to the deeper chambers. A well preserved hut cluster in one of the highest, and consequently, driest areas in the cavern system may have been for the senior man. Access to the kraal chambers has to go through this area, and this area also preserves the best evidence for graneries.

In contrast to the above ground component, upper and lower grindstones are relatively common in the cavern as well as pottery. Decoration on this pottery is almost absent but it appears to belong within the Moloko Tradition.

Unfortunately, early visitors to the site removed considerable amounts of metal work. There is a report that two wooden tinder boxes were removed from the cavern site. Tinder boxes, along with beads, were traded and used as gifts by Hodgson among the Seleka Rolong in 1823 (Cope 1977:153), so their presence at the site is not unexpected. A hand stitched leather shoe and belt were found in the course of a recent photographic survey in the cavern. Their preservation over a 160 year period is also not unusual. It is impossible, therefore, at this stage to link European material culture in any way to a later occupation or as a reason for the occupation.

The labour invested in the cavern village shows that occupation was not ephemeral. This is in keeping with Maselwane's and later, Mabalane's occupation of Lepalong, a period of considerable and sustained social and economic stress which, on present evidence, is directly linked to Mzilikazi and the less benevolent side of his presence in the region.

The close proximity between the above ground site, the cavern entrance and the below ground village suggest that both components are directly linked and, consequently, chronologically contemporary. It is difficult to be certain what the exact

relationship between the components was. The oral records tell us that when Mabalane moved to Lepalong, Maselwane was already there but was allowed to stay (Breutz 1953). The above ground site may have been the Baphiring residence, who were then allowed below if this was required. Alternatively, the two sites may have been used by a single community as local conditions required. If this was the case, then the disparity between the hut numbers (47 above to 70 below) could indicate that other people in the region may also have been allowed into the cavern during periods of direct threat. There are several stone wall sites located on top of the Gatsrand Hills to the south-east which may be contemporary with Lepalong.

Whatever the case, the upstairs village would have been highly visible. This emphasises the prime role of the cavern as a defensive refuge position and not specifically as a hideaway. There is no evidence, however, that the site was ever seriously threatened. Burnt villages are archaeologically recognisable and there is nothing to show that the above ground site was ever fired.

A further consideration is the defense of sorghum, millet and maize graneries below ground as well as any domestic stock the community still owned. Another cavern system at Lindequesdrift, some 47 km to the south-east of Lepalong (Haughton and Wells 1942) preserves the remains of baskets and maize. Complete pots in the Dwarsberge caverns may also have been for cereal storage (Teichler 1973) and the cavern at Gatkop in the southern Waterberg preserves wooden pole stock kraals (Hall, S. 1985).

With more detailed archaeological work this aspect of the Lepalong occupation can be tested.

Summary

The time depth of the archaeological record gives perspective to the scale of response in the later 18th and 19th centuries in the western and south-western Transvaal. The level of Sotho-Tswana aggregation is unprecedented in the archaeological record of the region and strongly emphasises the range of additional causes furnished by alternative analyses of the difaqane. These reorientate the 18th century Sotho-Tswana record towards specific responses to historical events. The archaeological record, however, retains an independence and potential to highlight the plausability of one, several or none of the causal agents proposed in the literature.

The second aspect of this paper has been a preliminary look at the archaeological and oral evidence for a specific response at the site of Lepalong. No hard and fast conclusions have been drawn which directly feed the difaqane debate because the orientation at this archaeological scale is more towards the anthropological than the historical. This contributes to a social history and a look at 'everyday life' overlooked in most work on the difaqane.

Lastly, I have an uneasiness that no matter what history in terms of cause is constructed for the difaqane, the popular image of African response will remain one of passive resignation to an all

embracing chaos. We cannot deny the extreme reactions and the case of Lepalong is a stark reminder, but this response nevertheless, was still actively structured in relation to the prevailing circumstances. Constructing pictures of the difaqane requires just as much an equal understanding of cultural context as it does historical context.

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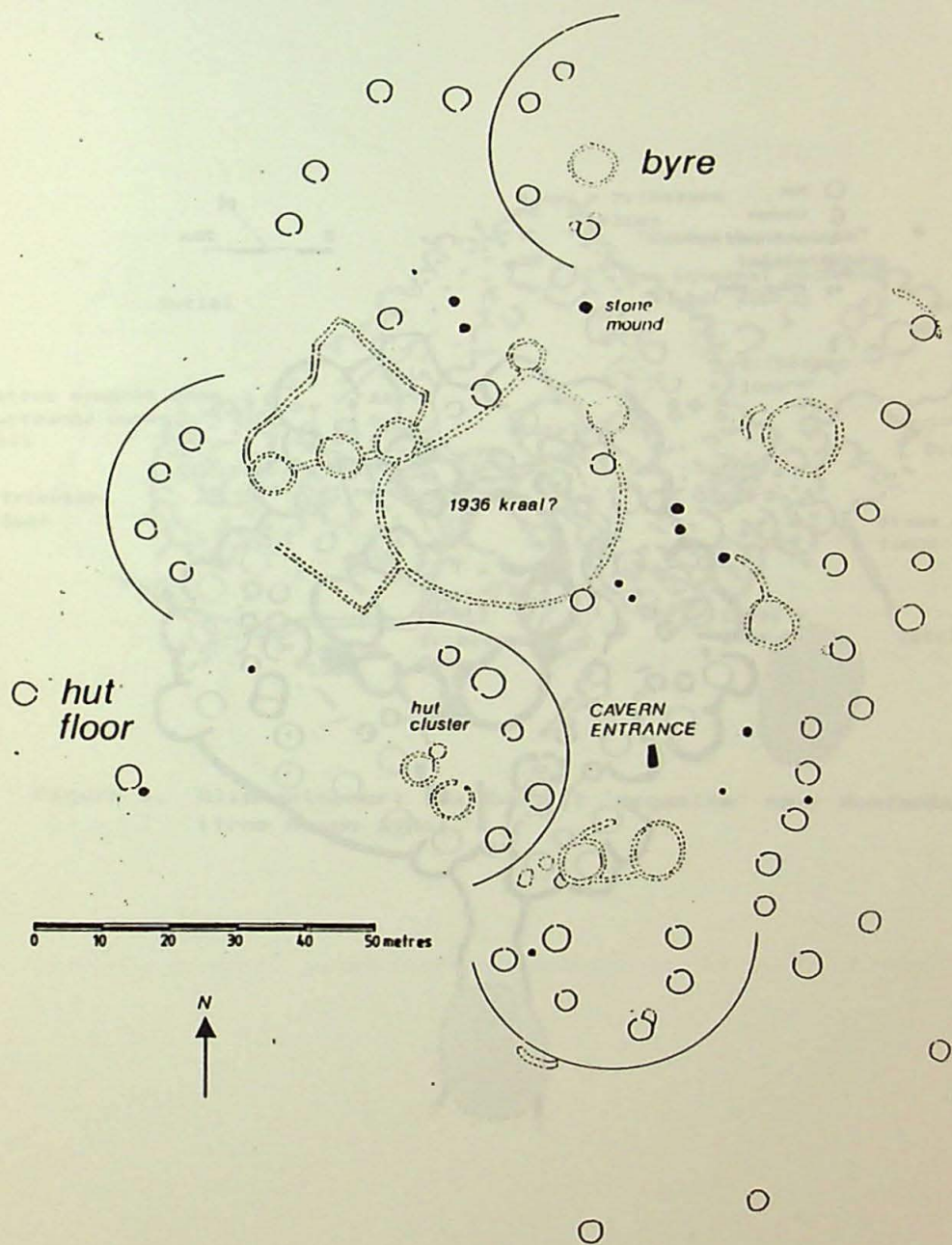


Figure 1. Lepalong above ground site plan.

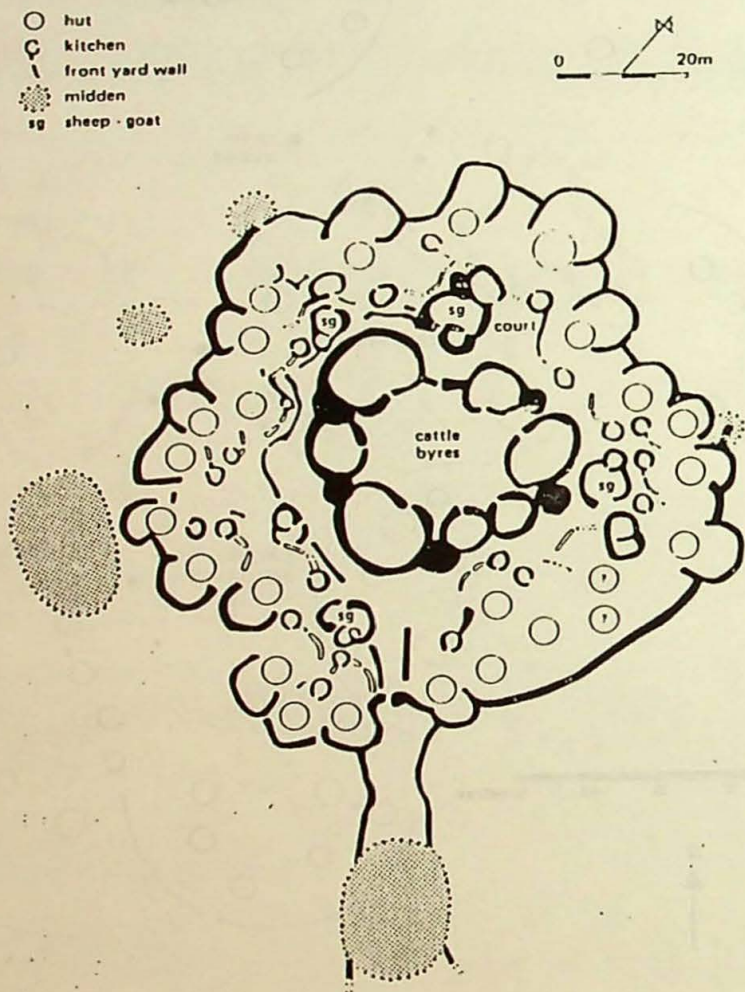


Figure 2. Plan of Late Iron Age stone wall settlement at Buffelshoek.

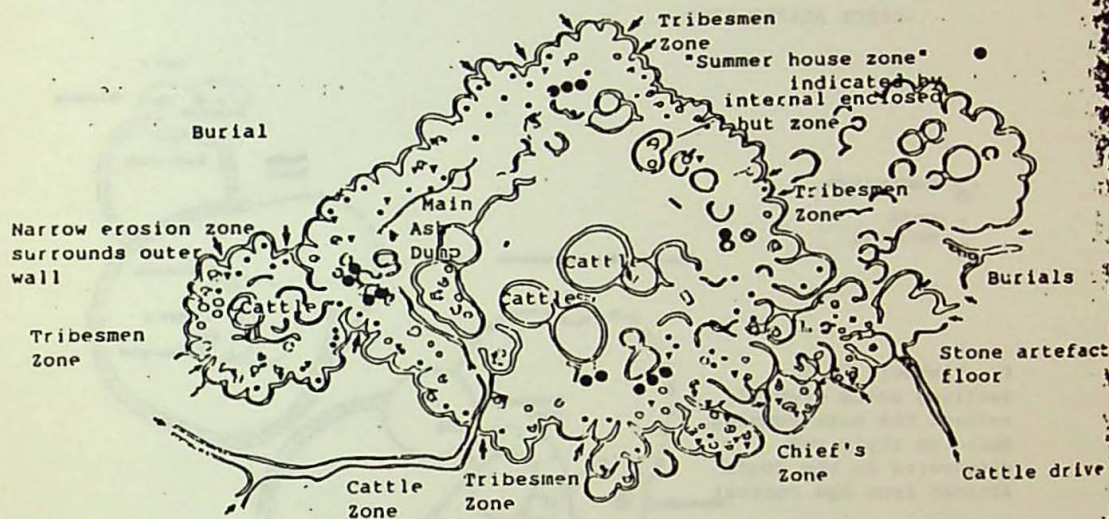


Figure 3. Oliphantspoort (Ba Kwena?) 'megashite' near Rustenburg (from Mason 1986).

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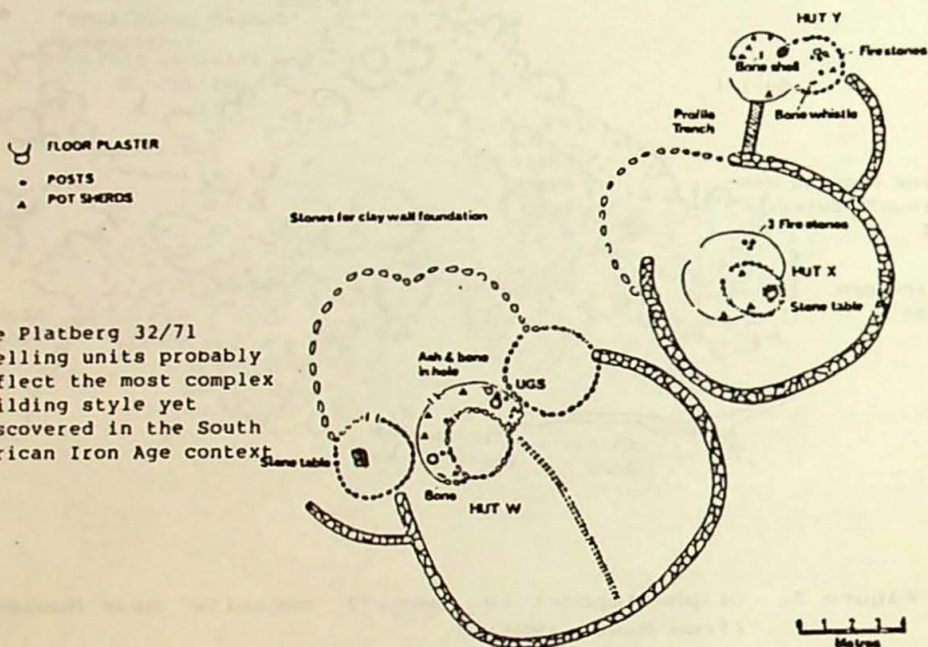


Figure 4. Plan of hut enclosures at Platberg (from Mason 1986).