



# THE DIGGING STICK

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## KAOXA'S SHELTER

### The first Public Rock Art Site in the Limpopo-Shashi Confluence Area of South Africa

Ed Eastwood<sup>1</sup>, Sven Ouzman<sup>2</sup> and Duncan MacWhirter<sup>3</sup>



*"When Kaoxa sits on his chair, he watches all around. People say there are leopards there. People say there are zebras. They say locusts. They say lions. They say jackals. They're in his house, right in his house. Elands are there. Giraffes are there. Gemsboks are there. Kudu are there. These things don't kill each other. They are God's possessions."*

*- Old K"xau - a !Kung shaman.*

Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe meet at the confluence of the mighty Limpopo and Shashi Rivers. This Limpopo-Shashi Confluence Area (LSCA) is a rugged beautiful and culturally enduring landscape. Karoo Sandstone ridges fit into a mosaic of bushveld woodland and mopane scrub. Antelope, elephant, giraffe, hyaena, jackal, lions, rhinoceros, wildebeest and zebra abound. These and other animals are depicted at the 148 recorded rock art sites in the Confluence Area. The LSCA is one of South Africa's lesser-known rock art treasure

*South African Archaeological Society*

houses. In the 1960s Murray Schoonraad (1960) and Alex Willcox (1963) wrote briefly about the co-occurrence of paintings and engravings and about the distinctive female imagery so common to the area. In the 1970s Harald Pager (1975) identified Y-shaped paintings as fish traps, though these Y-shapes have now been securely identified as San aprons (Blundell & Eastwood, in press). In the early 1990s the Soutpansberg Rock Art Conservation Group began surveying LSCA rock art. Since 1994 Palaeo-Art Field Services has systematically explored LSCA rock art. From this work it is clear that LSCA rock art is important for at least five reasons:

- Engravings and paintings co-occur - sometimes at the same site
- Heavily silicified cupules suggest an ancient origin for the rock engraving tradition
- At least 39 animal species are depicted in LSCA's San rock painting sites
- There is a high percentage of gendered human figures - especially females
- In addition to San rock paintings there is an enigmatic finger painting tradition

### KAOXA'S SHELTER

*"And when you arrive at God's place, you make yourself small. You have become small. You come in small to God's place."*

Old K"xau - a !Kung shaman

Not only is LSCA rock-art important for research; it also has great potential as an educational tool and tourism drawcard. This potential is one of the reasons 100 000 hectares of the LSCA has been proposed as a Trans-Frontier National Park that will have cultural history as its main theme on account of its rich archaeology, which includes Mapungubwe. In order to further bolster the public profile of the area's archaeology we decided to create a Public Rock Art Site on the farm Machete. Machete is named after the Venda chief Matshete and is a designated Natural Heritage Site 80 km west of Messina on the Pont Drift Road (Fig. 1). Machete is also home to a large and singularly important rock painting site that we have christened Kaoxa's Shelter after the Kalahari San Lord of the Animals whose Spirit World home teemed with a multitude of animal species. Just like this Spirit World home, Kaoxa's Shelter contains paintings of 16 animal species among its 190+ rock paintings. This species diversity is in marked contrast to the rest of the LSCA where the average is 2.7 animal species per rock art site. In addition, Kaoxa's Shelter has 13 unique rock paintings of locusts (Fig. 2). It is also no surprise that

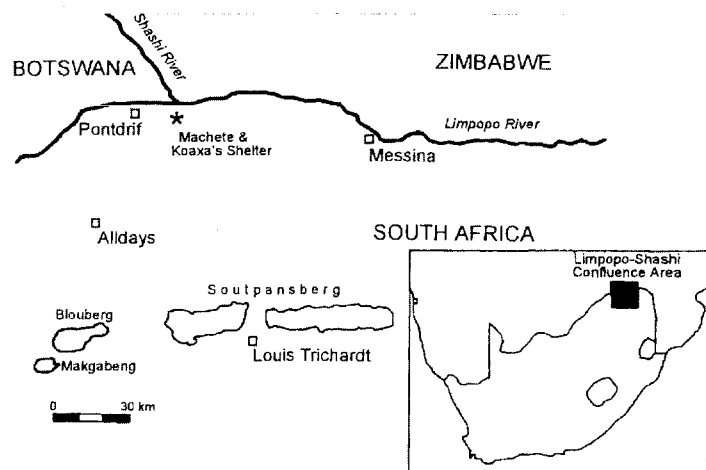


Figure 1. Location of Kaoxa's Shelter

Kaoxa's Shelter is physically imposing - a 25 m long, north-east facing overhang pierced by an impressive aperture - and is a fitting home for a God and his animal possessions. In November 1999 the National Monuments Council (now South African Heritage Resources Agency), Northern Province Office, approved a 5-Phase site development permit for Kaoxa's Shelter:

- A Feasibility Study, Comprehensive Site Recording and Site Management Plan were conducted and implemented (cf. Ouzman 2000).
- Two *Grewia* bushes were removed

- from outside the shelter to provide easy access.
- The shelter floor was capped with 100 mm of river sand and a stone walkway to keep dust levels down, protect the archaeological deposit and channel visitor traffic.
- A take-away brochure functions as an additional source of information and publicity.
- Four perspex-covered information boards support tracings and interpretive information.

A silk-screened sign at the shelter's entrance introduces the site, outlines current heritage legislation and suggests appropriate visitor protocol (see boxes "Kaoxa's Shelter" and "Visitor Protocol").



Figure 2. Redrawing of three of the thirteen unique painted locusts. Scale bar is 30 mm.

The Kaoxa's Shelter information board briefly introduces the site, its richness and importance.

### Kaoxa's Shelter

*You are now entering Kaoxa's Shelter.*

*According to some Kalahari San hunter-gatherers the ultimate source of supernatural power is Kaoxa's - Lord of the Animals. Around His house in the sky there live a multitude of animals including locusts, lions, gemsbok, kudu, eland and giraffe. Kaoxa's Shelter is a very special rock art site for the following reasons:*

Paintings of at least 16 animal species are found in this shelter. This diversity suggests that many species of animals were important in the belief system of the Limpopo-Shashi San hunter-gatherers.

There are 13 images of locusts painted - an unusual and unique subject for the San artists. These are the only known rock paintings of locusts in southern Africa.

At least 5 San painting 'styles' occur here. In addition there are geometric finger paintings.

There are 4 complex panels in this site, an unusual feature in the LSCA. Explanatory lecterns have been set up below each set of paintings.

A further indication of this richness can be seen in Figure 4 - a complex painted panel on which the following are painted:

Three paintings of San aprons - it is thought that aprons were part of the symbolism surrounding San puberty rites;  
 Two processions of 18 banded mongooses arranged in a circle;  
 A missing rock chunk that was removed in the 1950s to the National Cultural History Museum by Walter Battiss when such removals were permitted.

enigmatic finger paintings on the shelter's roof. These finger paintings have a regular

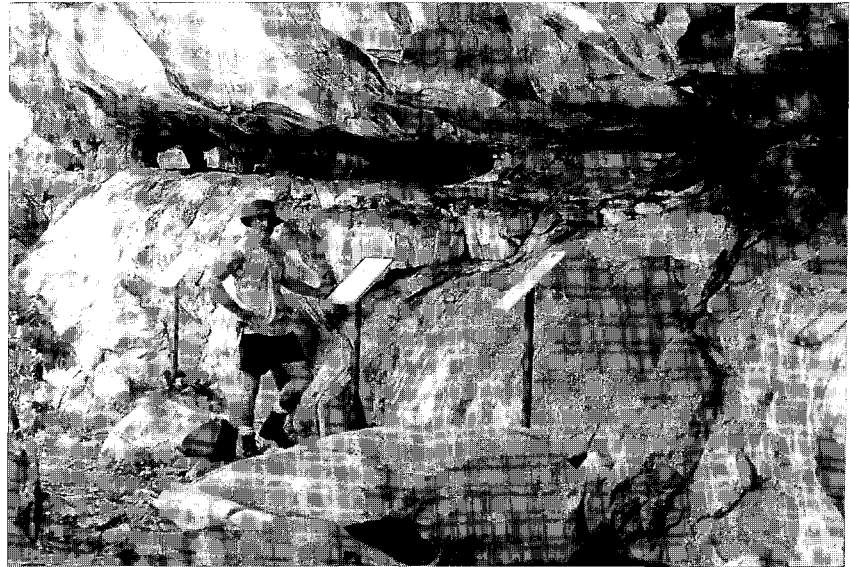


Figure 3. Kaoxa's Shelter - note the information boards.

Also in Kaoxa's Shelter, look out for a large hippopotamus-like animal painted in red. This probably represents the Rain-animal of the San Spirit World which shamans captured in an altered state of consciousness. In addition to the fine-line paintings there are also

geometric appearance. Below these finger paintings are grinding hollows that artists may have used for mixing their paints. Similar in appearance to these grinding hollows are the hollows engraved into a large rock at the

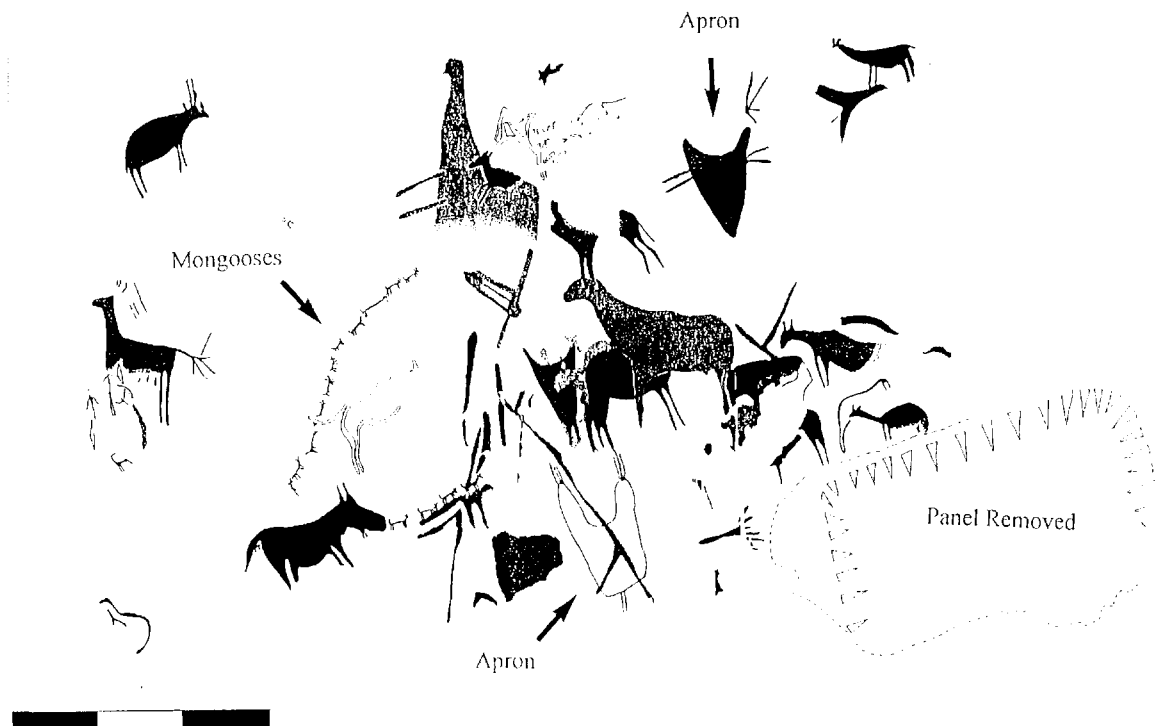


Figure 4. Complex painted panel with aprons, mongooses and Battiss removal. Scale bar is 300 mm.

northern end of the shelter. Arranged in a regular 8 x 4 pattern, the hollows are, in fact, a board game called *mafuvha* in tshiVenda or *ncuba* in siTsonga. It is thought that Shona, Sotho or Venda peoples may have made these hollows, which can be up to 1300 years old.

Kaoxa's Shelter is unparalleled in the diversity of animal species painted with depictions of bushbuck, eland, gemsbok, giraffe (see cover picture), hartebeest, hippopotamus, hyaena, impala, kudu, lion, locust, mongoose, sable/roan antelope, springhare, waterbuck and wildebeest. "These things don't kill each other. They are all God's possessions" (Halifax 1991:59).

At present Kaoxa's Shelter is the only Public Rock Art Site in the LSCA. Visitors are able to arrange day visits or they can camp backpacker-style or they can stay in well-appointed bungalows. It is hoped that Kaoxa's Shelter can serve as a model for further development of archaeological sites. Such Public Rock Art Sites are the most powerful and authentic way of informing visitors of the enduring complexity of the southern African cultural landscape.

### Acknowledgements

We thank the De Beers Fund for financial assistance for the LSCA rock art survey. We thank Dirk de Wit of Northern Province Heritage Services and the National Monuments Council Northern Province Office for approving this project. We thank Thomas Chauke, Oscar Mutsumi and Ricky Ramadzuli who helped to trace Machete's paintings. Bruce Murray of the Stamp & Sign Shop in Louis Trichardt produced the advertising pamphlet and constructed the signage for Kaoxa's Shelter.

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### Visitor Protocol

*The rock art in Kaoxa's Shelter is ancient and sacred. Please respect it and treat it as you would art in a church, gallery or museum. The South African Heritage Resources Act (25 of 1999) protects all archaeological sites with a R500 000 fine and two years imprisonment.*

*To avoid damaging and disturbing the art please adhere to the following protocol:*

Do not climb up onto the rock shelves. Stay on the pathway.

Do not put water or other substances on paintings as it causes the art to fade rapidly.

Do not touch the painted surfaces - the oils and sweat from your hands cause damage.

Do not chip or scratch engraved or painted rocks.

Do not pick up stone tools or pot sherds. If you remove these objects valuable information is lost about their context.

Do visit the site with an informed person - it adds greatly to the experience.

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*Pictogram* 12:25-32.

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**An extract from  
THE STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS  
OF THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, THABO MBEKI,  
National Assembly Chamber, Cape Town, 4 February 2000**

“While we were at Davos, I received a letter from Professors Nicholas Conard and John Parkington of the Universities of Tübingen and Cape Town respectively.

They make the important observation that:

‘The archaeological record of South Africa, including human fossils, artefacts and organic remains, has an international significance that extends far beyond the country’s borders...(Less well known) are the hominids that demonstrate the earliest signs of modern people and the treasure trove of rock art sites.’

While correctly pointing to the need to protect this heritage, to which we must surely respond, they also indicate the potential for job creation in the preservation and other activities at the various archaeological sites.

Needless to say, these can also be powerful tourist attractions, thus emphasising the importance raised by the two professors with regard to the challenge of looking after what we have inherited which is as old as the origins of humanity.”

### Archaeology in education on the web

President Mbeki refers to the potential of archaeology for job creation in preservation and other activities - and in tourism. One of the most significant roles that archaeology can play is in the sphere of education.

If you have internet access, some useful entry points for archaeology in education are: [www.archafrica.uct.ac.za](http://www.archafrica.uct.ac.za) and [www.wits.ac.za/science/archaeology/ardp](http://www.wits.ac.za/science/archaeology/ardp) The South African Archaeological Society Trans-Vaal Branch has a web site at [www.archaeology.org.za](http://www.archaeology.org.za)

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## THE STONE CAIRNS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

Don MacLennan\*

Cornwallis Harris (1851), who was exploring the Cashan Mountains (Magaliesberg), found a large heap of stones near the summit:

Near the summit grew a venerable mimosa, on one side of which we observed a large heap which had been formed by each passenger contributing one of these pebbles as he passed. Our savages added their mite, simply picking up the nearest, and casting it irreverently towards the hill. This being the only approach to external worship or religious ceremony that we had seen, we naturally became very inquisitive on the subject, but could elicit no satisfactory information.

To date there are hundreds of documented sites of cairns in South Africa, and there must be hundreds more not yet on the record. Why were they built in the first place, and who built them?

The answer to the first question is perhaps obvious. Some cairns, like the burial cairn at Kakamas, on the Orange River, famously illustrated by R.J. Gordon in the late eighteenth century, were graves so constructed that the body would not be disturbed by wild animals, and so that the deceased would remain in human memory.

The answer to the second question, who actually built these cairns, is not straightforward.



A cairn at Brandberg, Namibia

Broederstroom was an Iron Age village. It was established between A.D. 400-600 and laid waste by Mzilikazi on his way north to Zimbabwe. Revil Mason, who conducted the excavations, found there two large cairns, one of which had underneath it a chunk of iron slag; the other, a lens of ash three metres in diameter. Why did the inhabitants of an Iron Age village seek thus to memorialise their iron-making industry?

Cairns like the one Harris described were probably good luck mounds, not unlike Tibetan *hortans*. How does such a custom arise in the first place and become an accepted part of human behaviour? Did burial cairns become good luck cairns?

always possible or easy to separate *izivivane* (or marker cairns) from burial cairns either in the field or in the descriptions of early travellers. It is possible that what were once grave cairns became marker cairns (*izivivane*) by virtue of their location and/or the status of the person buried there. Another important consideration is that of soil acidity which could ensure that bones are not preserved in what may originally have been a grave.

While it is clear that the conical grave mounds are of Khoi origin, it is not true to say that the Bushmen had no tradition concerning cairns, since they too built them (Schapera 1930:373-4).

Which came first? Unfortunately it is not



The Khoi were once a dominant presence in large areas of South Africa. In South Africa today, with the exception of the Nama in the Richtersveld and the Griqua in the Northern Cape, there are no Khoi left as distinct groups because they have been absorbed into the rest of the population. What remains as a reminder of a once vibrant presence are the



Stone cairn at Kokskraal near Cookhouse

stone cairns, that Stow observed "on the brows of hills". In a sense their presence has not vanished completely, for the Xhosa adopted Khoi custom with regard to *izivivane*.

According to Janet Hodgson (1982:83-85):

*Izivivane* were found throughout Xhosa country and the practice of the Khoi was followed by the Xhosa. A passer-by would pick up a stone, green branch or bunch of grass, spit on it, and then throw it onto the cairn. Sometimes this was done without a word, other times a simple prayer was said which could include a plea for strength and health, an abundant supply of food on the way, and good luck in accompanying the journey's purpose. This practice is widely documented by early travellers in Kaffraria, but they could find no tradition as to how the cairns had originated and all the Xhosa could say was that it was the custom of their ancestors. They had a superstitious dread that neglect of the ritual would lead to misfortune.

One feature of Khoi culture makes it distinct: they built shaft graves for their dead. It is

clear that shaft graves have their origin outside southern Africa because they are found much further north in the continent. Silberbauer (1979:61) says:

Burials having a grave covering of stone cairns, found with the body interred in the vertical-flexed position and stones placed on, around and below the deceased are key attributes of pastoralist (Hottentot) mortuary practices, and are considered to be independent of the age of the deceased. This form of mortuary practice is not found in cave locations, as it is probable that pastoralists did not dispose of their dead in these localities.

In contrast, San burials in the southern Cape were often in caves, the bodies being covered with a stone slab, some of which were covered on the underside with red ochre. Morris (1992:67) says:

San graves contain tightly-flexed and horizontally placed cadavers with a rich assortment of grave goods. Neither a



Cairn at Kokskraal, Cookhouse District

niche nor a large stone cairn is a common feature. Khoi graves, on the other hand, are recorded as being marked with an elaborate stone cairn frequently associated with a niche in the grave shaft. Grave goods are not normally placed in the grave and the skeleton may be in a horizontal - or vertical - flexed position.

This does not mean that the San always buried their dead in caves, for these are not readily available in much of the region inhabited by the San, like the Kalahari.



Where there were no caves, the San had to dig a grave and cover it with stones.

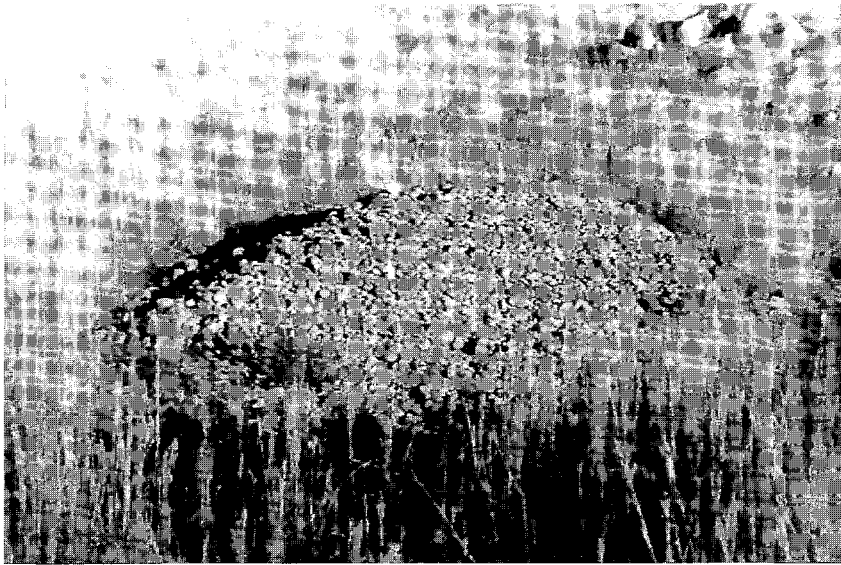
The problem remains that we do not know for sure who first instituted the *izivivane*, or good luck cairns. We do know that the Xhosa and the Zulu had (and still have) the custom of adding a stone to a cairn before making a journey, which suggests that they might have taken over the custom from the Khoi. The story of the meeting of these two peoples 1000 to 1500 years ago is told by Robin

problem of Khoekhoe origins. What archaeological and physical anthropological evidence there is suggests that the ancestors of the pastoralist Khoekhoe must have been a southern African Late Stone Age people whose culture was influenced by that of the Early Iron Age farmers and metalworkers. Little has happened in the last two decades of archaeological research to alter this view substantially.

There is no doubt that, as Carl Vernon (1995) says:

The elements of the landscape inter-relate time and space... The *izivivane* indicate that man has long been an element of the landscape. Probably over thousands of years every square metre of the country has the imprint of human footsteps. The *izivivane* cause one to wonder by providing a temporal dimension to the landscape.

For some people *Heitsi-Eibib*, the god of the Khoi, is still alive and flooding the landscape with his presence. Lawrence van der Post bears witness to this (1984: 135-136):



A good luck cairn at Mount Ayliff District.

Photo: Abner Nyamende

Derricourt in *Beyond the Cape Frontier: studies in the History of the Transkei and Ciskei* (1974). The Khoi were in a strong position and had skills and valuable knowledge of the environment the Xhosa found useful for their own survival. For Khoi clicks and Khoi words (e.g. *qamata* for god) to have entered the Xhosa language suggests an amicable and intimate relationship. Even the high cheekbones found in some Xhosa today are ascribable to the exchange of brides from Khoi to Xhosa chiefs. Peires notes other borrowings. Nevertheless, depressingly little is known about the Khoi. One must accept Hall's summary (1987:3) of the state of knowledge about these fascinating people:

Few definite early Khoekhoe sites have been identified, and although the topic is of great interest to the archaeological fraternity, no archaeologist has yet pursued in depth the

The Hottentots had their own highly evolved image of a god, subtle, complex, most evocative and, for me, intensely moving and real. They called him *Heitse-Eibib* and saw him in the red of the dawn which they held to be the blood of the wounds he had incurred in his everlasting battle with night for day. I was surrounded in childhood by even more Hottentot than Bushman survivors because the place where I was born was once the capital of what we as children thought of as the Kingdom of the Griquas, one of the last coherent Hottentot clans driven into the interior by the white tide of immigration from the Cape to the north. In the process they were subjected by well-meaning missionaries to a strange injection of biblical myths and stories which did not eliminate *Heitse-Eibib* but merely drove him intact to the core and inner keep of their spirit. They not only showered stories about him on me but at moments of crisis and emphasis still swore in his name. He became so real to me that I found poetic justice and continuity in the fact that he should follow in the spoor of the Morning Star, an heroic and wounded

protagonist of light in the van of the passing-out parade of the military academy of the sky. I learned to feel his presence in the wind which stirred the leaves of the wild olives and great broom bushes where I crouched with burning cheeks and smarting, bare feet for relief from the heat of the great flaming days of summer. The Griquas had taught me his spirit was also always in the wind. But he would be most near me when I contemplated one or the heaps of smooth pebbles piled high in his honour in places from what is Zululand in the southeast today to where the mythological sun went down in the far west over deep ancient river-beds that run no more and where his people are no longer known. These piles were raised by Hottentots bound, out of their constant awareness of what was due to their sense of creation, to deposit pebbles in recognition of *Heitse-Eibib's* all-pervasive presence and help, wherever they had forded a river or stream. In my childhood those pebbles were as much wayside shrines to me as those encountered by knights of the Round Table and Holy Grail on their quest.

The cairns remain a silent and provoking witness.

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*Professor MacLennan has appended a substantial list of further reading, too lengthy for inclusion here. It will be made available to anyone desiring a copy. Regrettably, also, there is space for only a few of his illustrations.*

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## A GIANT HANDAXE FROM CANTEEN KOPJE AND A TRIBUTE TO MINING COMMISSIONER GIDEON RETIEF

David Morris

Massive handaxes have been found at the early Acheulean site of Canteen Kopje, Barkly West. One of them, recovered from a diamond digger's pit in 1997, measures 385 x 156 mm (4.75 kg), while a shorter but heavier 7.75 kg handaxe (356 x 197 mm) was found stashed away in the old Mining Commissioner's Museum, established by Gideon Retief in 1948. It was Retief, as Mining Commissioner, and with a keen interest in mineral collecting and archaeology, who halted mining at Canteen Kopje in the 1940s in order to preserve the site and have it declared a national monument. Mr Eddie Fortune, now aged 91, was the last digger to work there, and recalls Retief's excitement at seeing "the stones" - Acheulean artefacts that were being dug out by the thousand. Fortune remembers, too, the visit of the Abbe Breuil. "Canteen Kopje at Barkly West is one of the most celebrated sites," said Breuil: "Not only are there enough specimens to fill a museum to overflowing, but to build it of them also!"

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Canteen Kopje was threatened by renewed mining in the late 1990s. The then National Monuments Council and the McGregor Museum in Kimberley responded swiftly. The community of Barkly West - by way of a Heritage Committee formed to address the controversy - recognised the value of preserving its past. What at first appeared a hopeless cause took on a momentum of its own, eventually attracting generous support from the Royal Netherlands and United States Embassies: the open air displays at Canteen Kopje and the new Barkly West Museum, in a restored tollhouse, will be opened in September this year. Excavations were carried out by Peter Beaumont, with John MacNabb assisting in one of the digs and analysis of the material.

Handaxes are, of course, to feature prominently in the displays... but what of the one that got away?

We have found but a single reference to it - in a 1951 newspaper article on Gideon Retief himself. It was after one of the periodic great floods here - the 1944 floods - that Mr Retief was walking along the eroded bank of the Vaal River near Canteen Kopje. There, it is said, he came across an absolutely enormous handaxe, measuring a staggering 18 by 9 inches (457 x 229 mm)! The Abbe Breuil, quoted in the article, said "it must have taken a giant of a man to have used such a huge handaxe."

But when the Retief Collection was accessioned and packed up for the move to the Tollhouse earlier this year, there was no trace of this mammoth tool. Other items had disappeared, too, alas - there were, for instance, labels indicating "diamond in matrix", the specimens themselves having

long since been stolen (the old purpose-built museum cases lacked locks - visitors of yesteryear were evidently trusted more than they can be today!). But try sneaking off with an 18 inch handaxe in your pocket... Was it perhaps donated to some other institution? There is a letter from C. van Riet Lowe to Retief referring to "one special implement in your [Retief's] collection which the Abbe feels should be here [at the Archaeological Survey] - a long, thickish pick-like tool - not a normal handaxe or cleaver." Could this have been it?

The relationship between mining and archaeology in the area has been one of give and take. In the past, the diggings exposed many sites along the river and provided opportunities for research - but today, with heavy machinery involved, huge quantities of sediment are scooped out by the hour. Old diggings can be reworked at a profit. The impacts on archaeology are devastating, and every effort is necessary to heighten awareness around heritage issues.

It is remarkable that it took a Mining Commissioner, Gideon Retief, to save Canteen Kopje and to set up Barkly West's first museum. Special tribute is to be paid to him in the new displays.

In 1949 Van Riet Lowe predicted that "When the last diamond claim has been abandoned, archaeologists...will be interested in Canteen Kopje, in the Vaal River diggings, where lie the prehistoric remains of a million years of human evolution".

#### Reference

Van Niekerk, D.J. 1951. Hy versamel ander soort skatte. *Naweekse Byvoegsel tot Die Burger*, 9 Junie 1951:15.



### SOUTH AFRICANS DIG AT TEL DOR

For the past four years a group of South Africans under the leadership of the Department of Biblical Archaeology at UNISA have taken part in the excavations at Tel Dor on the coast of Israel. They join, as volunteers, the team of Hebrew University of Jerusalem under Prof Ephraim Stern. Their aim is to uncover the ancient harbour city of Dor.



Climbing down to the Bronze Age at Tel Dor.

Dor was a Canaanite harbour, a lively commercial centre, which traded with the Egyptians and the Sea Peoples amongst others. In Iron Age times Dor was ruled by the Israelites but kept its Canaanite identity; it was subsequently overrun by Sikel Sea People, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Crusaders. Following construction of the harbour at nearby Caesarea, Dor declined, and all that remains today is a hill of ruins. Tel Dor's exceptional interest to archaeologists lies partly in the imprints of various periods in artefacts and architecture. It is one of the few sites where gifted and artistic Phoenicians (as the Greeks called the Canaanites) can be studied. An important treasure of silver and gold pieces was unearthed at Dor in 1996.

The South African groups have made interesting finds, uncovering an Hellenistic wall in an area thought to have been merely a Crusader midden, thereby doubling the extent of the Greek excavation area. Further significant finds were made in this area in 1999 - a slate platter and a jar with powdered residues of the red dye for which the Phoenicians were famous. In another area South Africans found polychrome Phoenician potsherds, an indication that the excavation was breaking through to Bronze Age levels.

If you would like to know more about UNISA Biblical Archaeology excavations in Israel, contact Magdel le Roux, tel 012-4294389 / email [pleroux99@hotmail.com](mailto:pleroux99@hotmail.com), or Ina Brand, tel 012-4294485 / email [inabrand@netactive.co.za](mailto:inabrand@netactive.co.za)

The South African Archaeological Society was founded in 1945 to promote archaeology through research, education and publication. The *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, for publication of current research in southern Africa, is issued to members twice a year. Occasional publications in the *Goodwin Series* appear from time to time. *The Digging Stick* is the Society's general interest newsletter with three issues per year.

The views of the authors are their own and the society does not take responsibility for them.

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