

The intersection of archaeology, oral tradition and history in the South African interior¹

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Abstract

The historical entanglement of indigenous and colonial societies in South Africa created not only multiple points of social and cultural interaction, but also a repository of interconnected material, oral and documentary records. A multi-source, comparative approach across disciplinary boundaries is, therefore, essential to achieve a full and seamless account of late precolonial and early colonial African history. Oral tradition could serve as a bridge between archaeology and text-based history, thereby enabling historically known political lineages to be connected with the archaeological ruins of specific precolonial African towns. Similarly, documentary sources on African societies of the interior are often very limited in scope even deep into the nineteenth century, as a result of which the complementary use of archaeological methods and data becomes a methodological imperative. Three case studies from the South African interior, Marothodi, Kaditshwene and Magoro Hill, are presented to illustrate the explanatory potential of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the more recent African past.

Keywords: Archaeology; Oral tradition; History; Entanglement; Interdisciplinarity; Five Hundred Year Initiative; Olifantspoort; Marothodi; Kaditshwene; Magoro Hill.

Introduction

The 18th and 19th centuries constituted an era of momentous change in the South African interior. The era was characterised, among other things, by the emergence and decline of large African polities, colonial expansion, the forging of new identities and the disappearance of others, as well as significant population movements, such as witnessed during the *difaqane* and the Great

¹ This article is an updated version of an inaugural lecture, entitled *The entangled past: Integrating archaeology, oral tradition and history in the South African interior*, which was presented at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, 10 November 2011.

Trek. This period also saw the introduction of new cultigens, materials and technologies, including the gradual adoption of writing as a primary archive. It was during this formative period that the area beyond the Orange and Vaal rivers became inextricably woven into the fabric of a broader South African society as the thrust of colonial advance reached deep into the interior. The whole region south of the Limpopo River became part of an embryonic but irreversibly globalised world that had started to emerge a few centuries earlier in the wake of European colonisation and expansion.²

The historical entanglement of indigenous and colonial societies in South Africa during this period created not only multiple points of social and cultural interaction, but also a repository of intertwined evidential sources. The idea of entanglement implies that these multiple records, which are reposed in material, oral and written archives, must be studied conjunctively and comparatively to gain a more complete understanding of the past.³ This article explores how archaeology, oral tradition and documentary history can be constructively combined in a study of inland African societies during these two critical centuries.

The central thesis to be put forward is that a structured interdisciplinary approach is essential to achieve a full and seamless account of late precolonial and early colonial African history. It will be argued, firstly, that oral tradition can provide a bridge between archaeology and text-based history and, secondly, that even deep into the so-called historical period, documentary sources on African societies of the interior are often very limited in scope, thus necessitating recourse to archaeological methods and data.

The Late Iron Age site of Olifantspoort 20/71, a stone ruin complex located to the southwest of present Rustenburg, clearly illustrates the historical void that results from a disciplinary hiatus. Site 20/71, with its well-preserved stone-walled residential units, stock enclosures and cattle drives, constitutes the most comprehensively mapped and excavated Late Iron Age site since archaeology became an established discipline in South Africa. Excavations by Revil Mason in the 1970s uncovered the foundations of no fewer than 83 houses and tested 15 middens, which altogether yielded a rich body of evidence

2 See, e.g., S Marks & A Atmore "Introduction", S Marks & A Atmore (eds), *Economy and society in pre-industrial South Africa* (London, Longman, 1980), pp. 1-43.

3 A similar plea for an "integrative multidisciplinary ('triangular') research model" is made in ES van Eeden, "Environmental history within a revitalized integrative research methodology for today and tomorrow", *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 36(4), 2011, pp. 314-329.

comprising faunal and floral remains, ceramics, beads, metal implements and jewellery, cosmetic ore, as well as human burials.⁴ No other Late Iron Age complex has been explored in such depth. However, despite this wealth of material information, the occupants of Olifantspoort 20/71 have remained historically anonymous and peripheral. Except for a general association with the Kwena cluster among the Tswana, they feature only in passing and in a general descriptive way in histories of the Tswana of the western Bankenveld. This historical amnesia has endured despite the fact that recorded oral traditions specifically link Olifantspoort and environs with another Tswana chiefdom, the Kubung, and their capital Motlhaka-oo-Tshose, from which they were dislodged during the disruptions of the *difaqane* in the 1820s.⁵

A historiography of interdisciplinarity

The 1960s and 1970s were marked by great optimism for the potential integration of archaeology and history. This could partly be attributed to significant advances in the study of African oral traditions, mainly by Jan Vansina, David Henige and Joseph Miller.⁶ Renewed interest in late precolonial and early colonial African societies culminated locally in a series of historical studies on the Swazi, Pedi, Zulu and Xhosa, as well as a comprehensive archaeological investigation of Late Iron Age communities on the southern Highveld.⁷ This was followed by trailblazing archaeological investigations of early historical Tswana capitals associated with the Rolong and the Hurutshe and at the Zulu capital of Mgungundlovu.⁸ However, in the long run these initiatives remained rather eclectic and failed to develop into a coordinated

4 RJ Mason, *Origins of black people of Johannesburg and the southern western central Transvaal, AD 350-1880* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 1986), pp. 351-478.

5 P-L Breutz, *Die stamme van die distrik Ventersdorp*, Ethnological Publications, No. 31 (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1954), pp. 50-51; Transvaal Native Affairs Department (TNA), *Short history of the native tribes of the Transvaal*, Reprint, No. 24 (Pretoria: State Library, 1905), p. 15. Further enquiries are obviously necessary to confirm the specific link between Site 20/71 and Motlhaka-oo-Tshose.

6 J Vansina, *Oral tradition: A study in historical methodology* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); D Henige, *Oral historiography* (London, Longman, 1982); JC Miller (ed.), *The African past speaks: Essays on oral tradition and history* (Kent, Dawson, 1980).

7 P Bonner, *Kings, commoners and concessionaires: The evolution and dissolution of the nineteenth-century Swazi state* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983); P Delius, *The land belongs to us: The Pedi polity, the Boers and the British in the nineteenth-century Transvaal* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983); J Guy, *The destruction of the Zulu kingdom* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1982); TMO'C Maggs, *Iron Age communities of the southern Highveld* (Pietermaritzburg, Natal Museum, 1976).

8 RJ Mason, "Archaeology and history in the South African interior", *Historia*, 30(1), 1985, pp. 6-11; JE Parkington & M Cronin, "The size and layout of Mgungundlovu, 1829-1838", *The South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series*, 3, 1979, pp. 133-148.

interdisciplinary study of the recent past.

Interest in the study of 18th- and 19th-century African societies subsequently waned. The reasons for this were manifold. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the so-called “kingdom historians”, who had produced such influential studies on 19th-century African polities, turned their attention to what they perceived as the more pressing issues of contemporary politics and struggle history.⁹ This coincided with increasing doubt about the historicity of oral traditions and a realisation that the imprecision of radiocarbon dating for the post-1650 AD period would complicate efforts to securely date sites mentioned in oral accounts.¹⁰

Interest in interdisciplinary cooperation between archaeologists and historians has slowly but surely returned since the mid-2000s, especially as regards the study of the late precolonial and early colonial periods in the southern African interior. In 2004, for example, two previously Botswana-based archaeologists, Andrew Reid and Paul Lane, edited a seminal volume on African historical archaeologies. They argued for the importance and relevance of the archaeological study of historical contexts, stating that “few other areas of the world can rival the potentials on offer in Africa for interdisciplinary study of the past, and the synergies that this can produce”.¹¹ In their view, the key value of archaeology to the study of text-based history becomes manifest in the concepts of multivocality and dissonance. Different societies or different sections within a society often produce different accounts or versions of the past, a lack of correspondence that may be reflected not only in documentary evidence or oral testimonies, but also in associated inventories of material culture. It is precisely these divergent material inventories that allow archaeologists to study the voiceless elements in historical societies,

9 P Bonner, AB Esterhuysen, MH Schoeman, NJ Swanepoel & JB Wright, “Introduction”, N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered: Southern African precedents and prospects* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2008), pp. 1-19; JB Wright, “Thinking beyond ‘tribal traditions’: Reflections on the precolonial archive”, *South African Historical Journal*, 62(2), 2010, pp. 268-286.

10 R Reid, “Past and presentism: The ‘precolonial’ and the foreshortening of African history”, *Journal of African History*, 52, 2011, p. 136; A Stahl, “The archaeology of African history”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42(2), 2009, p. 243. As a result of fluctuations in the atmospheric content of radiocarbon and the wiggle in the radiocarbon curve, calibrated radiocarbon dates for the recent past, i.e. the period since about AD 1650, are of limited use. JC Vogel & A Fuls, “The spatial distribution of radiocarbon dates for the Iron Age in Southern Africa”, *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 54(170), 1999, pp. 97–101. Projects are currently under way to explore the applicability of other chronometric dating techniques, such as optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) and archaeomagnetic dating.

11 A Reid & PJ Lane, “African historical archaeologies: An introductory consideration of scope and potential”, A Reid & PJ Lane (eds), *African historical archaeologies* (New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004), p. 6.

those that are not remembered or represented in oral or written accounts.¹²

A new initiative to bring together historians and archaeologists emerged in 2006 with the establishment of the Five Hundred Year Research Group, which later obtained funding from the National Research Foundation as the Five Hundred Year Initiative (FYI). The FYI provided a framework for inter-institutional and cross-disciplinary engagement in a number of focus areas, principally KwaZulu-Natal and the four northern provinces. Registered projects, which are mainly focused on the more recent past of Sotho-Tswana, Nguni, Tsonga and Venda speakers, are geared towards exploring themes such as identities, political centralisation, agricultural intensification, as well as trade and interaction on late precolonial and colonial frontiers.¹³ Contributions to the first conference, *Identity in formation: The last 500 years*, were published in 2008 in a volume entitled *Five hundred years rediscovered: Southern African precedents and prospects*.¹⁴ The choice of the title was a deliberate play on CFJ Muller's *500 years: A history of South Africa*, a multi-authored volume and widely used university textbook that appeared in 1969 and which consigned the history of African societies to a 20-page appendix.¹⁵

The results of this interdisciplinary initiative have also been disseminated in conference papers and published in journals such as *African Studies*, the *South African Historical Journal* and the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.¹⁶ Perhaps the most ambitious of these projects, at least in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration, has been the investigation of a widely distributed complex of terraced stone-walled sites between Ohrigstad in the north and Carolina in the south in Mpumalanga. The sites have been linked to the Kone, an ill-defined and heterogeneous grouping of Sotho speakers who claim a distant Nguni past and were eventually incorporated

12 A Reid & PJ Lane, "African historical archaeologies..." , A Reid & PJ Lane (eds), *African historical archaeologies...*, pp. 9-10.

13 P Bonner, AB Esterhuysen, MH Schoeman, NJ Swanepoel & JB Wright, "Introduction", N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered ...*, p. 13.

14 N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered ...* .

15 CFJ Muller, (ed.), *500 years: A history of South Africa* (Pretoria, Academica, 1969).

16 P Delius & M Schoeman (eds), "Special issue: History and archaeology in conversation – South Africa meets East Africa Workshop", *African Studies*, 69(2), 2010, pp. 207-375; M Mulaudzi, MH Schoeman & S Chirikure, "Continuing conversations at the frontier", *South African Historical Journal*, 62(2), 2010, pp. 219-228; P Delius & S Marks, "Rethinking South Africa's past: Essays on history and archaeology", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38(2), 2012, pp. 247-255.

into the Pedi kingdom.¹⁷ It has been suggested that the extensive network of stone-walled cattle tracks and terraces associated with these homesteads is indicative of precolonial agricultural intensification similar to that found in East Africa.¹⁸ In her review of *Five hundred years rediscovered*, veteran historian Shula Marks hailed the book as heralding the emergence of new paradigms in history and archaeology which, as far as the latter is concerned, reflects a break from a “structuralist straightjacket” and an “ahistorical normative model” with its heavy dependence on ethnography and culture-historical frameworks.¹⁹ This is perhaps a somewhat over-optimistic and simplistic view, since the archaeological contributors to the *Five hundred years rediscovered* Volume, as well as participants in the FYI do not all speak with one voice, and both anthropology and history will provide equally essential frameworks for interpreting continuity and change in African societies during the more recent past.

The scholarly interest and sentiments espoused in the Five Hundred Year Initiative coincide with a wider recognition among historians that too much emphasis has been placed on colonial and postcolonial African history. Very recently, Richard Reid has deplored the marginalisation of precolonial African history, complaining about “the tendency toward historical foreshortening” and “a scholarly culture that attributes an exaggerated significance to the history of the twentieth century”. According to Reid, the neglect of precolonial history and the emphasis on colonial history have, in some respects, severed Africa’s present and recent past from “deeper patterns of both change and continuity” and obscured the “very real continuities in African identities from the precolonial past”.²⁰ Though the shift in historical interest in the 1980s to the colonial era was perhaps inevitable and necessary in an increasingly independent Africa, this has meant that historians have not fully engaged with the steady contributions made by archaeologists to the study of the more recent precolonial period.

17 P Delius & MH Schoeman, “Revisiting Bokoni: Populating the stone ruins of the Mpumalanga Escarpment”, N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered ...*, pp. 135-167; P Delius, T Maggs & M Schoeman, “Bokoni: Old structures, new paradigms? Rethinking pre-colonial society from the perspective of the stone-walled sites in Mpumalanga”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38(2), 2012, pp. 399-414.

18 T Maggs, “The Mpumalanga Escarpment settlements: Some answers, many questions”, N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered ...*, pp. 169-182.

19 S Marks, “New paradigms in history and archaeology in South Africa”, *African Studies*, 70(1), 2011, pp. 138-139.

20 R Reid, “Past and presentism...”, *Journal of African History*, 52, 2011, pp. 135-136, 148.

Disciplinary strengths and limitations

According to Reid and Lane, the “constructed’ and partial nature of all historical sources” necessitates an awareness of their strengths and limitations before attempting comparison and integration.²¹ This would ensure that the different historical data sets - material, oral and written - are not prematurely integrated before each has been analysed on its own terms within its own disciplinary framework.²² Obviously, such analyses and structured integration of the different data sets should preferably be undertaken by interdisciplinary teams or an individual adequately steeped in the appropriate methodologies.²³

Archaeology

As noted by eminent American historical archaeologist James Deetz, archaeology provides us with a repository of material culture, the “commonplace quality” of which often remains unrecorded and which sheds light on everyday life.²⁴ Archaeology’s prime value lies in the fact that it can shed light on people and places that are often not mentioned in the written record, especially those underrepresented elements in society that often constituted a majority of the population.

Archaeology’s evidential value is, however, not only restricted to exploring the quotidian activities of ordinary or marginalised people. Unlike written sources, the entanglement between humans and the things they use and discard implies that material remains are not exclusive to a particular society or segment of society.²⁵ In late precolonial and early colonial African history, archaeology in many cases constitutes the primary source of information on the lives of commoners and kings alike. As pointed out by Reid and Lane, therefore, the material record is “unfettered by disjointed and disabling, artificial historical divisions”, but remains “a constant source of information”

21 A Reid & PJ Lane, “African historical archaeologies...”, A Reid & PJ Lane (eds), *African historical archaeologies...*, p. 9.

22 J Vansina, “Historians, are archaeologists your siblings?”, *History in Africa*, 22, 1995, p. 396.

23 A Andr n, *Between artifacts and texts: Historical archaeology in global perspective* (New York, Plenum Press, 1998), pp. 180-181.

24 J Deetz, “American historical archeology: Methods and results”, *Science*, 239(4838), 1988, p. 363.

25 I Hodder, “Human-thing entanglement: Towards an integrated archaeological perspective”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (NS)*, 17, 2011, pp. 154-177.

on precolonial, colonial and postcolonial worlds, thus serving as “an important foil to the thrusts of history”.²⁶

Another perceived strength of archaeology is the fact that material evidence, which is concrete, is usually left behind without a view to posterity and can thus be regarded as more neutral than written records, where the compilers generally have their contemporaries and sometimes their legacy in mind.²⁷ Archaeology is also privileged to shed light on the longer term, the so-called *longue durée*, a perspective that can be employed to probe and corroborate findings and insights from other sources reflecting more fleeting time frames.²⁸ Incidents, events and short-lived trends in history are commonly intertwined with gradual developments and can thus often only be understood against the backdrop and trajectory of long-term change.²⁹

The limitations of archaeological evidence revolve around the fact that it is difficult to gain access to individuals and their thought processes. Material evidence only indirectly sheds light on deeply symbolic and religious issues and many actions do not leave material traces.³⁰ Even momentous political events often have little impact on the daily lives of ordinary people, which could, in turn, lead to misrepresentation of a particular era. Nor is it a secret that archaeological evidence is fragmentary and difficult to recover, and thus often inconclusive. Archaeologists have been rightfully accused of the extravagant use of extrapolation, of overly imaginative interpretations based on slim evidence which, often enough, can be overturned by a new or unexpected find.³¹ Dating and chronology also pose serious obstacles, especially when it concerns the recent past where the broad time spans of deep prehistory are inappropriate and irresolute and where radiocarbon and calendrical dates cannot be easily matched. It has been pointed out that “the temporal and spatial scales and resolution of archeological and historical data are generally

26 A Reid & PJ Lane, “African historical archaeologies...”, A Reid & PJ Lane (eds), *African historical archaeologies...*, p. 15.

27 J Vansina, “Historians, are archaeologists your siblings?”, *History in Africa*, 22, 1995, p. 384.

28 A Stahl, “The archaeology of African history”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42(2), 2009, pp. 241-255.

29 J Vansina, “Historians, are archaeologists your siblings?”, *History in Africa*, 22, 1995, p. 375.

30 DP Dymond, *Archaeology and history: A plea for reconciliation* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1974), pp. 42-45.

31 J Vansina, “Historians, are archaeologists your siblings?”, *History in Africa*, 22, 1995, p. 397. In this way, the discovery of a dump of sheep, cattle and pig bones in the sea at Oudepost 1, a Dutch military outpost near Saldanha Bay between 1669 and 1732, radically changed the composition of the faunal assemblage retrieved from the site, as well as its initial interpretation, which suggested that the garrison relied almost exclusively on wild game as a source of protein and therefore depleted a resource shared with local Khoesan people. C Schrire, K Cruz-Urbe & J Klose, “The site history of the historical site at Oudepost I”, *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series*, 7, 1993, p. 30.

dissimilar” and therefore difficult to reconcile.³²

Oral tradition³³

When considering the historical value of oral accounts, it is useful to draw a distinction between oral traditions and oral histories. Oral traditions accordingly extend back “beyond living memory”, whereas oral histories are defined as “memories and recollections of the individuals who experienced or witnessed in their own lives the events they relate”.³⁴ Oral tradition has been compared to a metaphorical hourglass, the sides of which are elastic. The upper chamber represents the recent past, usually the last three to four generations, in which events are related that can be dated and sites are remembered that can be located. The lower chamber represents foundational accounts, usually in mythical form such as, for example, the Tswana creation story which recounts that the first people and animals emerged from the waterhole of Matsieng near Mochudi in Botswana where their footprints have been preserved in the form of rock engravings, but which we know can be attributed to the San.³⁵ The neck of the hourglass reflects the middle period, which serves mainly as a “charter” for the current social order. This constitutes a floating gap between the distant mythical past and the recent past, and it is therefore crucial to determine when a particular tradition was first recorded; whether, for example, in the 1820s and the 1830s, when the first missionaries and explorers encountered the western Tswana, or shortly after 1900, when the newly appointed British administration of the Transvaal commissioned the collection of oral histories.³⁶

From the above it is clear that the historical reliability of oral traditions as a source of information decreases the further back in time one goes. Their historicity is not only eroded by the passage of time, but their evidential value can also be affected by selection, reinterpretation, feedback, lengthening

32 P Robertshaw, “Sibling rivalry? The intersection of archaeology and history”, *History in Africa*, 27, 2000, p. 271.

33 It is a moot point whether the study of oral traditions should be regarded as a separate discipline. In South Africa, oral traditions pertaining to African societies of the interior have been primarily collected and analysed by linguists and anthropologists, in particular state ethnologists such as NJ van Warmelo and P-L Breutz. By implication, archaeologists and historians using these sources, or embarking on the collection of fresh accounts, will inevitably straddle into a new disciplinary terrain.

34 RJ Mason, “Archaeology and Native North American oral traditions”, *American Antiquity*, 65(2), 2000, p. 240.

35 N Walker, “In the footsteps of the ancestors: The Matsieng creation site in Botswana”, *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 52(166), 1997, pp. 95-104.

36 RJ Mason, “Archaeology and Native North American oral traditions”, *American Antiquity*, 65(2), 2000, p. 258; T Spear, “Oral traditions: Whose history?”, *History in Africa* 8, 1981, pp. 166-167.

and telescoping, all of which are often dictated by current sociopolitical constraints.³⁷ Of critical importance is the chain of transmission from narrators to recorders. The first recorders of oral traditions in the interior were often inadequately prepared for the task, lacking a solid understanding of the language, culture and social organisation of their informants. When anthropologists and historians began a more systematic collection of oral narratives in the twentieth century, a great deal of information had already been lost through neglect of or disconnection with a remote past.³⁸

As with all sources, oral accounts have to be subjected to rigorous evaluation, both in terms of their production and collection, and with reference to independent verification and falsification.³⁹ Some scholars would go as far to suggest that oral tradition can never be regarded as stand-alone proof or disproof of anything, while most would argue that the veracity of an oral tradition is largely dependent upon its compatibility with other evidential sources. In Vansina's view, oral traditions constitute important primary hypotheses that have to be confirmed by independent evidence such as that uncovered by documentary or archaeological research.⁴⁰

One way to overcome the inherent weaknesses of oral traditions as historical source would be to work comparatively as recommended by Schapera, who stressed the importance of cross-checking oral traditions, not only of the different ethnic groups within a chiefdom, but also of the different chiefdoms that have been in contact with each other.⁴¹ It is also maintained that the reliability of a particular tradition is commensurate with how widely known and accepted it is in a particular society. Oral recollections that do not meet this qualification should at the most be regarded as oral testimonies and as not carrying the same evidential weight.⁴²

37 T Spear, "Oral traditions ...", *History in Africa*, 8, 1981, pp. 171-172.

38 For example, we simply do not have the same comprehensive oral data base for the four northern provinces to work with as that contained in the James Stuart Archive for Zulu speakers. C Hamilton, "Backstory, biography, and the life of the James Stuart Archive", *History in Africa*, 38, 2011, pp. 319-341. Schapera observed long ago that Tswana traditions are by no means as "extensive as those reported from some other parts of Africa" and, excluding origin myths, often only "take us back to the first half of the eighteenth century". I Schapera, "Should anthropologists be historians?", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 92(2), 1962, p.147.

39 RJ Mason, "Archaeology and Native North American oral traditions", *American Antiquity*, 65(2), 2000, p. 249.

40 J Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (Wisconsin, University Press, 1985), p. 196.

41 I Schapera, "Should anthropologists be historians?", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 92(2), 1962, p. 148.

42 J Peires, He wears short clothes! Rethinking Rharhabe, c 1715 – c 1782 (Paper, Concluding Five Hundred Year Initiative Conference, Wits University, 2010), p. 29.

Despite their limitations, oral accounts open up an important window onto the past and, as noted by Schapera, “even for relatively recent periods they often contain much detail not found in written records ...”.⁴³ Oral tradition provides an emic perspective, an insider’s view, which, although subject to alteration through generational transmission, still offers a self-portrait of a society’s history.⁴⁴ A careful study of Tswana oral traditions has revealed that they have a factual basis, “an evidentiary base” that is acknowledged by the bearers themselves who make a clear distinction between folktales, fables and historical accounts.⁴⁵

History

The power of written evidence, with which the discipline of history is often loosely equated, lies in the fact that it is direct and immediate, and sheds light on well-defined events in which mostly known personalities were involved. Texts in their various forms often provide access to the thought processes of protagonists, allowing us to gain unparalleled insight into human agency in the past. Neither archaeology nor oral tradition can produce the same detailed and coherent construction of the recent past as history.⁴⁶ The perception that documentary evidence is intrinsically more unreliable and biased than the mute and indirect material evidence is perhaps also unfounded. As Jeff Peires correctly points out, “most historical evidence arises out of the need of people in the past to communicate not with posterity but with each other”.⁴⁷

It is axiomatic that documentary evidence should be subjected to thorough source and textual criticism to uncover intended or unintended misrepresentations and misinformation. Archaeologists, in particular, have to be cautioned against the uncritical and unsophisticated use of documents without due regard to context and intent.⁴⁸ On the other hand, concern has been expressed that an excessive focus on the “production of historical knowledge and the ways in which the past is represented over time” could

43 I Schapera, “Should anthropologists be historians?”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 92(2), 1962, p. 147.

44 RJ Mason, “Archaeology and Native North American oral traditions”, *American Antiquity*, 65(2), 2000, p. 244.

45 B Morton, “Narrativity and Tswana oral tradition”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, 43, 2011, p. 61.

46 J Deetz, “American historical archeology: Methods and results”, *Science*, 239(4838), 1988, p. 363; R Paynter, “Historical and anthropological archaeology: Forging alliances”, *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 8(1), 2000, p. 14.

47 J Peires, “At the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell: Historical priorities for South Africa in an age of deconstruction”, *African Historical Review*, 40(1), 2008, p. 68.

48 DP Dymond, *Archaeology for the historian* (London, The Historical Association, 1967), p. 9.

be counterproductive and lead to a neglect of the task of more orthodox historical reconstruction and explanation.⁴⁹ In similar vein, a warning has been sounded against “an obsession with representation” rather than “an interest in the referents (i.e. the actual persons and events) to which the representations refer”.⁵⁰

Written sources are few and far between for the late precolonial and early contact periods in the South African interior.⁵¹ Even for the more recent period there are “porous barriers between orality and literacy”, as highlighted by Lize Kriel in her study of the missionary archive of the nineteenth-century northern Transvaal.⁵² A considerable number of the early Trekkers were barely functionally literate, as can be attested to by anyone familiar with the archives of the early Transvaal state.⁵³ Lacunae in the oft unmethodical and intractable Archive of the State Secretary, the main documentary repository of pioneer Transvaal, partly reflect the administrative imperfections of a fledgling state. Archaeologists who principally depend on extant historical syntheses to contextualise their fieldwork data have to bear in mind that, just as excavations can never fully uncover a site and its contents, archival research is also selective and largely framed by the questions that are asked. Important information may be overlooked in archival research unless the questions are formulated with due reference to the aims of the archaeological enquiry and the materiality of the past.

Transcending disciplinary boundaries: Historical archaeology as an enabling framework

Just prior to the launch of the Five Hundred Year Research Initiative, historian Philip Bonner made a persuasive call for historical archaeology to be employed as an enabling framework to answer “the burning questions of our past”. He was specifically referring to the history of Late Iron Age

49 P Maylam, “Dead horses, the baby and the bathwater: ‘post-theory’ and the historian’s practice”, *South African Historical Journal*, 42, 2000, p. 127.

50 J Peires, “At the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell’ ...”, *African Historical Review*, 40(1), 2008, p. 70.

51 See, e.g., the discussion of sources for early Ndebele history, RK Rasmussen, *Migrant kingdom: Mzilikazi’s Ndebele in South Africa* (London, Rex Collings, 1978), pp. 163-173.

52 L. Kriel, “To my Dear Minister: Official letters of African Wesleyan evangelists in the late 19th-century Transvaal”, A Delmas & N Penn (eds), *Written culture in a colonial context: Africa and the Americas, 1500-1900* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2011), p. 235.

53 JCA Boeyens, “Black ivory’: The indenture system and slavery in Zoutpansberg, 1848-1869”, EA Eldredge & F Morton, *Slavery in South Africa: Captive labor on the Dutch Frontier* (Boulder, CO, Westview, 1994), p. 209, footnote 34.

and early colonial African societies and the use of, especially, oral tradition as an ancillary source to be engaged by archaeologists. Although in itself a legitimate field of study, Bonner was not so much interested in the kind of historical archaeology that was already being practised at the Cape, which he regarded as essentially a text-driven archaeology that focused primarily on the “archaeology of the colonial, of white masters and brown slaves”.⁵⁴ These sentiments were reiterated in the first major publication of the FYI, in which the case was again made for “re-orienting the study of [African] farming communities toward a more explicitly ‘historical archaeology’”.⁵⁵

Viewed from this perspective, it would seem that the onus to transcend disciplinary boundaries and push back the barriers that separate precolonial and early colonial African history has been put largely on archaeologists, albeit in collaboration with documentary and oral historians. Methodological barriers will ensure that archaeologists have a unique vantage point. The simple fact is, as Pete Robertshaw has pointed out, that all archaeologists are, in a sense, historians, but historians cannot become archaeologists unless they formally undergo the requisite technical training and achieve the mandatory professional accreditation.⁵⁶ Conversely, the complexities of documentary research, which, similar to archaeological fieldwork, is usually underpinned by a long archival apprenticeship, should not be underestimated.

Archaeologists studying sites dating to the historical period face methodological hurdles of their own. Although the material inventories of colonial and African historical sites overlap, they still differ substantially. Both need long and detailed study before they are mastered and few archaeologists will become experts in both fields. Because of the enduring nature of African cultural principles and continuities in the associated material cultural record, so-called Iron Age archaeologists seem best equipped to deal with African

54 P Bonner, “Answering the burning questions of our past through ‘historical archaeology’”, *The Digging Stick*, 22(3), 2005, p. 3. Ironically, concurrently with this shift away from precolonial African history, historical archaeology blossomed in the Cape. Cape historical archaeology, which was principally influenced by American historical archaeology and conceptualised largely as a study of early Dutch and British colonial expansion, would, however, have little impact on the study of precolonial African history. J Behrens & N Swanepoel, “Historical archaeologies of southern Africa: Precedents and prospects”, N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered...*, p. 26.

55 P Bonner, AB Esterhuysen, MH Schoeman, NJ Swanepoel & JB Wright, “Introduction”, N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered ...*, p. 12. In their overview of the prospects of inter- and transdisciplinary research into the last 500 years in the same Volume, Behrens and Swanepoel also pointed out that historical archaeology was seen as a “capacitating framework” by most collaborators. J Behrens & N Swanepoel, “Historical archaeologies of southern Africa ...”, N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered...*, pp. 23-39.

56 P Robertshaw, “Sibling rivalry? ...”, *History in Africa*, 27, 2000, p. 262.

farmer sites dating to the early historical period.

At this point it should be noted that not all archaeologists of the near past feel comfortable with the designation of historical archaeology.⁵⁷ Graham Connah, for instance, argues that historical archaeology emerged in North America as a field of enquiry principally concerned with the spread of European influence and the study of colonial European material culture. The label was coined in part to distinguish such research endeavours from prehistoric archaeology, which was supposed to deal with the Native American past. In his view, historical archaeology therefore embodies an ambiguous concept that has not really taken on in Europe and which has limited relevance when applied to the African past.⁵⁸ Many Africanist archaeologists would be uncomfortable with such a narrow Eurocentric definition of the field of historical archaeology, which has since acquired a much more inclusive purview.⁵⁹

Disciplinary intersections: Case studies from the interior

The question arises how the three evidential sources should be integrated to unlock the more recent past, in particular that of African societies of the South African interior. The consensus view in text-aided archaeology is that documents and material culture should be combined in such a way that, between them, they lead to a new understanding that would not have been possible through either source alone. In other words, and this admonition is usually directed at archaeology, one discipline should not just amplify what is already known from the data set of another discipline and thus serve as its handmaiden.⁶⁰ It has been argued that it is exactly at the point of contradiction between the various records that the greatest advances in our study of the recent past can be made. Of importance is the degree of consonance and dissonance between the various evidential sources, which requires a careful study of the mentions and silences in the different records.⁶¹

57 A Stahl, "The archaeology of African history", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42(2), 2009, p. 248.

58 G Connah, "Historical archaeology in Africa: An appropriate concept?", *African Archaeological Review*, 24(1&2), 2007, pp. 36-39.

59 J Behrens & N Swanepoel, "Historical archaeologies of southern Africa ...", N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered...*, pp. 24-27.

60 J Deetz, "American historical archeology ...", *Science*, 239(4838), 1988, p. 363.

61 A Reid & PJ Lane, "African historical archaeologies...", A Reid & PJ Lane (eds), *African historical archaeologies...*, pp. 9-10; R Paynter, "Historical and anthropological archaeology...", *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 8(1), 2000, p. 15.

Although the evidential independence of archaeological, oral and documentary data should be treasured, it would be restrictive to hold the view that the greatest strength of the three data sets lies only at the point of disjuncture or in addressing the silences manifest in each other. Especially regarding the eighteenth century in the interior, for which documentary evidence is largely absent and which requires the comparative use of archaeological and oral evidence, a more fruitful tack would be to apply the principle of convergent verification. This implies that facts or findings should be affirmed through recourse to multiple and independent strands of information and through the application of multiple methods of investigation.⁶² As the following case studies show, the greatest confidence in our interpretations emerges exactly at the point where the evidence contained in the three data sets converges. In this respect, oral tradition often serves as a bridge between the material and documentary past and enables us to animate the precolonial material record with remembered places, peoples and personalities.⁶³

Marothodi

The first case study demonstrates how oral tradition and archaeology can be combined to wrest a late precolonial Tswana capital from historical anonymity. In the mid-1980s, Revil Mason recorded an extensive Iron Age site on the farm Vlakfontein 207 JP, to the southwest of the Pilanesberg. The immense size of the stone-walled site is evident from aerial photographs (See Image 1). Mason noted that the site not only had “the largest cattle enclosures registered in the [then] Transvaal”, but also “some of the largest cattle enclosures known in the African Iron Age”.⁶⁴ Although the site was generally ascribed to Tswana speakers, its real historical identity was uncovered only some twenty years later.⁶⁵

62 RJ Mason, “Archaeology and Native North American oral traditions”, *American Antiquity*, 65(2), 2000, p. 262.

63 The three case studies have been chosen primarily because of my own involvement in their conceptualisation and execution and my familiarity with the relevant data and contexts. In all three instances a structured interdisciplinary approach was embedded in the research design from the beginning. The research at Magoro Hill forms part of the Five Hundred Year Initiative.

64 RJ Mason, *Origins of black people ...*, pp. 3, 5, 689.

65 JCA Boeyens & S Hall, “Tlokwa oral traditions and the interface between history and archaeology at Marothodi”, *South African Historical Journal*, 61(3), 2009, pp. 3-27.

Image 1: Aerial view of the main settlement unit at Marothodi



Source: Courtesy of Simon Hall

The first clue to the site's identity was provided by Tlokwa oral traditions, which recalled that a chiefly branch of this Tswana cluster had shifted their capital to a large plain close to the Pilwe Hills towards the end of the eighteenth century. Oral records associated the capital site, known as Marothodi, with the historical farm Bultfontein 204 JP, onto which a small section of the stone walling extends.⁶⁶ The second pointer in the oral geography, which linked the Tlokwa indisputably with the stone ruins, was their association with a nearby copper mine on the border of the farms Vlakfontein 207 JP and Palmietfontein 208 JP. Oral testimonies collected more than a hundred years ago vividly recalled the Tlokwa's association with this copper mine and their reputation as skilled manufacturers of copper wire, bracelets and other ornaments.⁶⁷ This association was further strengthened when excavations yielded extensive evidence of metal working. Most of the forty homesteads in the central complex of Marothodi were involved in either smelting copper or iron or both, or with forging metal (See Image 2). In addition, several copper and tin-bronze earrings were uncovered from house excavations in a prominent settlement unit in the largest chiefly ward.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ V Ellenberger, "History of the Batlokwa of Gaberones (Bechuanaland Protectorate)", *Bantu Studies*, XIII, 1939, pp.172-173; V Ellenberger, "Batlökwa", I Schapera (ed.), *Ditirafalô tsa merafe ya Batswana ba lefatshe la tshirelesô: Traditional histories of the native tribes of Bechuanaland Protectorate*, Reprint (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1940), p. 223; I Schapera, *A handbook of Tswana law and custom* (London, Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. xii, 308.

⁶⁷ RH Massie, *The native tribes of the Transvaal* (London, Harrison, 1905), pp. 25-26.

⁶⁸ S Hall, D Miller, M Anderson & JCA Boeyens, "An exploratory study of copper and iron production at Marothodi, an early 19th century Tswana town, Rustenburg district, South Africa", *Journal of African Archaeology*, 4 (1), 2006, pp. 3-35.

Image 2: Copper crucible furnaces attached to the back courtyard of a household in Marothodi



Source: Photo by Francois Coetzee

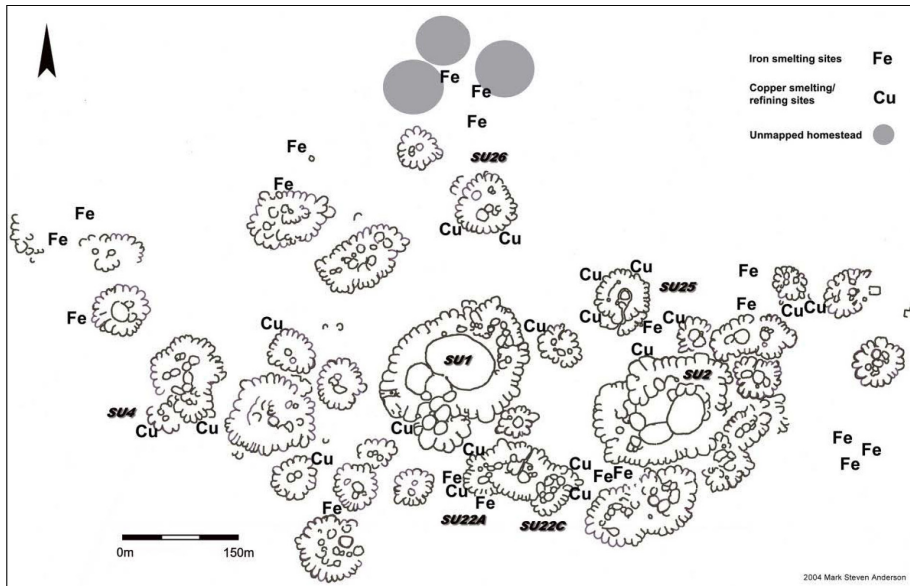
Once the historical identity of the site had been verified through the convergence of the oral and material data sets, it became possible to explore the sociopolitical organisation and regional alliances of the Tlokwa in greater depth.⁶⁹ Oral traditions suggest that at least two chiefs, Bogatsu and Kgosi, ruled at Marothodi. This ties in well with the spatial organisation of the central section of Marothodi, which is dominated by two much larger homesteads with exceptionally large central cattle enclosures (See Image 3). The oral records also allude to a regional alliance between the Tlokwa and their near neighbours, the Kgafela Kgatla, with whom they held joint initiation (circumcision) schools.⁷⁰ The Kgatla cluster, in turn, was connected with the Rooiberg tin mines, from which came the tin that was used in the production of the bronze earrings from Marothodi.⁷¹

69 M Anderson, *Marothodi: The historical archaeology of an African capital* (Northamptonshire, Atikkam Media, 2009).

70 F Morton, "Bogwera and mephato", *Botswana Notes and Records*, 43, 2011, pp. 7-8.

71 S Hall, M Anderson, JCA Boeyens, & FP Coetzee, "Towards an outline of the oral geography, historical identity and political economy of the late precolonial Tswana in the Rustenburg region", N Swanepoel, A Esterhuysen & P Bonner (eds), *Five hundred years rediscovered ...*, p. 70.

Image 3: Central section of Marothodi



Source: After Hall et al, “An exploratory study ...”, *Journal of African Archaeology*, 4(1), 2006, p. 7

New questions can now be asked about the nature and impact of long-distance trade links, as well as to what extent the Tlokwa’s control of valuable mineral resources contributed to their ascendancy as a regional power in the late eighteenth century. In addition, Marothodi can now be used as a historical datum point from which to examine the earlier history of the Tlokwa lineage in the broader area. Doubt has already been expressed about the historical Tswana identity of clusters such as the Fokeng and the Tlokwa. Based largely on a stylistic analysis of ceramics, it has been suggested that these groups have an ultimate Nguni origin and became Tswana-ised at a later stage.⁷² Since the forging of new identities is often expressed through material culture, archaeologists are uniquely positioned to engage with this issue by digging backwards through the oral geography of the Tlokwa and their material imprint on the landscape.⁷³

72 TN Huffman, *Handbook to the Iron Age: The archaeology of pre-colonial farming societies in Southern Africa* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), p. 437.

73 A Reid & PJ Lane, “African historical archaeologies...”, A Reid & PJ Lane (eds), *African historical archaeologies...*, p. 23. It is also possible that, through the processes of amalgamation and settlement concentration, the identities of subjugated groups might have become submerged in oral accounts of the ruling dynasty that eventually settled at Marothodi. Differences in the spatial composition of homesteads and stylistic variability in material culture within the capital may, however, still betray their presence and attest to the heterogeneity of its population.

Kaditshwene

The second example, Kaditshwene (the precolonial Hurutshe capital between about 1790 and 1823), demonstrates the evidential value of an eyewitness written account. It also shows how a multi-source approach not only resolved the issue about the location of the town, but also helped to construct a rich historical context against which the archaeological research could be projected.

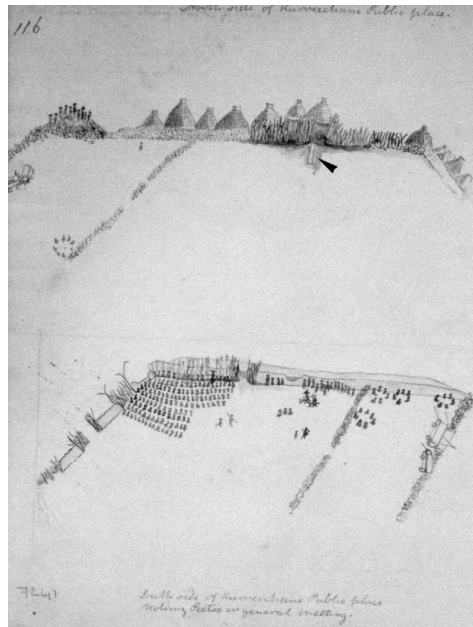
As is known, Kaditshwene was misidentified by Revil Mason in the 1960s and erroneously associated with a stone-walled complex about 40 km to the south that turned out to be its precursor, Mmakgame.⁷⁴ The reasons for this misidentification, which could be attributed largely to a disregard for the recorded oral traditions of the Hurutshe, have been discussed elsewhere.⁷⁵ Here we focus on the process through which the different data sets were integrated to reaffirm Kaditshwene's location and to gain a firmer grasp of the spatial and temporal dynamics of the site. Firstly, a field survey and a study of aerial photographs of the area designated in Hurutshe oral traditions confirmed the presence of a large stone-walled complex on a hill on the border of the farms Bloemfontein 63 JP and Kleinfontein (or Olifantspruit) 62 JP, in the Enselsberg area north of Zeerust. Secondly, interviews with older Hurutshe residents in the area revealed that they were well acquainted with the hill known as Kaditshwene, though they knew little of the history of the ruins. Thirdly, information contained in the published and unpublished journals of John Campbell, a director of the London Missionary Society who visited the Hurutshe capital for a little more than a week in May 1820, complemented the survey and mapping data. Campbell described Kaditshwene as one of the largest towns in the South African interior with an estimated population of 16 000. He noted that the complex on Kaditshwene Hill consisted of a "king's district" (the *kgosing*) and a "northern district", subdivisions which correlate spatially with the two large settlement units documented during the field survey.⁷⁶

74 Revil J Mason, *Origins of black people ...*, pp. 651-679.

75 JCA Boeyens, "In search of Kaditshwene", *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 55(171), 2000, pp. 3-17.

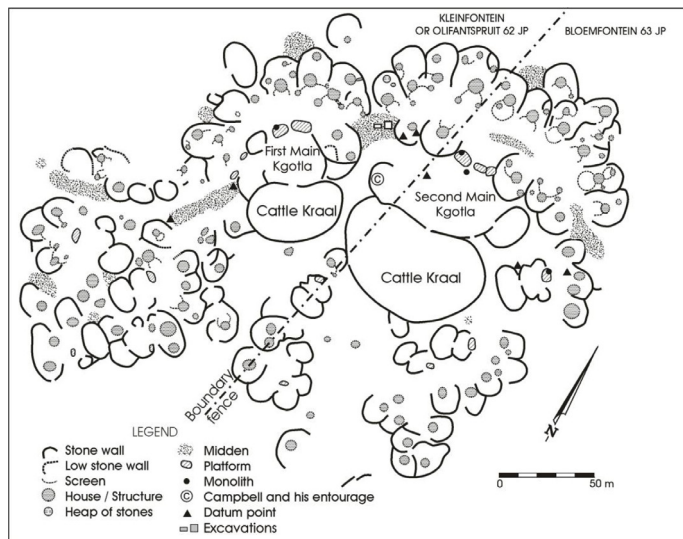
76 J Campbell, "Unpublished journal of a journey into the South African interior in 1819-1820", Campbell Collection, MSB77, Vol. III (Cape Town, National Library of South Africa, 1820); J Campbell, *Travels in South Africa undertaken at the request of the London Missionary Society; being a narrative of a second journey in the interior of that country, 1820*, Vol. I (London, Westley, 1822), pp. 221-223, 277, 299.

Image 4: John Campbell's sketch of the assembly of leaders in the second central court (kgotla) of Kaditshwene, 10 May 1820



Source: National Library of South Africa

Image 5: Site plan of the central ward in the kgosing (chief's division) of Kaditshwene



Source: Mapped by Sidney Miller

Settlement layout details in Campbell's unpublished sketch of his campsite inside the central court of Kaditshwene correlate with the groundplan of the central ward, permitting us to determine the sequence of the two chiefly courts in the town's centre (See Images 4 and 5). Next to each court there is a large midden. Among the Tswana such large middens only accumulated near the great council-place (*kgotla*) of the chief (*kgosi*) in the capital. This suggests that at least two chiefs ruled at Kaditshwene, a chronology which synchronises with the oral and documentary evidence on the reigns of Sebogodi and Diutlwileng. At the time of Campbell's visit, the Hurutshe were ruled by the regent chief Diutlwileng, whose court was marked by a monolith near its northern entrance. This upright stone, which appears in Campbell's sketch of the assembly of leaders held inside the court on 10 May 1820, is still standing today (See Image 6). The diachronic evidence on the sequence of the two central courts can be used to frame questions about internal settlement dynamics. Clearly, the exponential increase in the size of the second main court and its associated cattle enclosure reflects important sociopolitical and economic changes within the capital.

Image 6: The monolith close to the main entrance of the second central court of Kaditshwene

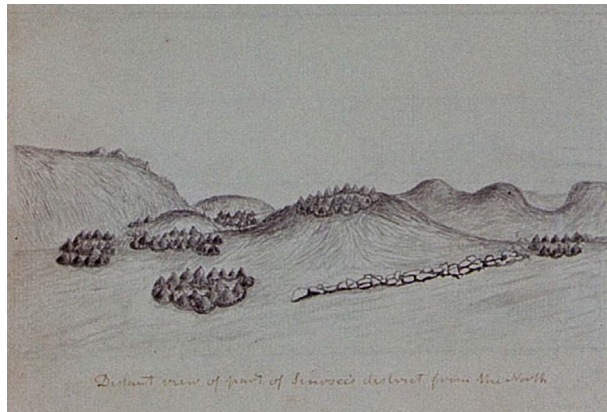


Source: Photo by author

Combining the different data sets also sheds light on the processes of settlement aggregation and political amalgamation that had begun among the western Tswana during the second half of the eighteenth century. In his journal, Campbell describes his visits to a “district” of Kaditshwene, which

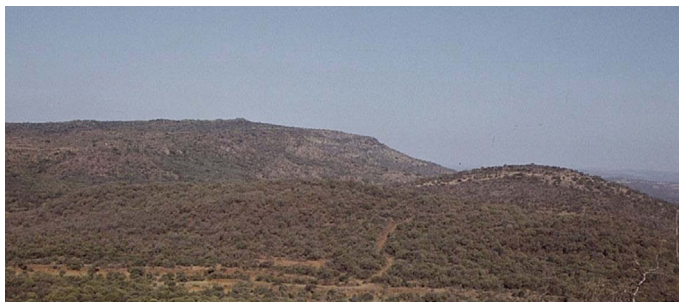
was located “about a mile and a half in distance” to the south and was “nearly equal in size” to that of the regent chief.⁷⁷ Based on a combination of archaeological, oral and pictorial data (See Images 7 & 8), a well-preserved stone ruin complex at this exact geographic location can be associated with a junior branch of the Hurutshe, the BooMokgatla who, under their leader Senosi, had become subject to Kaditshwene prior to the *difaqane*.⁷⁸ Without access to these multiple strands of evidence, it would have been much more difficult to establish the contemporaneity of the two settlements and unravel their political interrelationship.

Image 7: John Campbell’s sketch of the district of Senosi



Source: National Library of South Africa

Image 8: View of the location of Senosi’s settlement from the north



Source: Photo by author

⁷⁷ J Campbell, *Travels in South Africa undertaken at the request of the London Missionary Society ...*, Vol.3 I, pp. 227-228.

⁷⁸ P-L Breutz, *The tribes of Marico District*, Ethnological Publications, No. 30 (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1953), p. 198.

Documentary and oral evidence also reveals the gradual impact of the encroaching Cape colonial frontier on the western Tswana and the wider regional context against which the archaeology should be framed. Two prominent figures associated with the northern Cape frontier zone, the Oorlam leader Jager Afrikaner and the Khoe evangelist Cupido Kakkerlak, accompanied Campbell on his journey to Kaditshwene.⁷⁹ Just before Campbell's arrival at Kaditshwene, the infamous Cape colonist and frontiersman Coenraad de Buys fled the Hurutshe capital. Oral and near-contemporary documentary accounts relate that De Buys had become embroiled in local conflicts and assisted the Hurutshe to subdue the Lete, a neighbouring chiefdom located close to a tributary of the Madikwe River.⁸⁰

Complementary data sets thus made it possible to locate and identify the historical Kaditshwene, elucidate its local and regional context and calibrate its time of occupation. It is against this historical background that further questions can be framed and asked of the archaeological data, which will be the essential avenue to explore and reconstruct the daily lives of the townspeople, their dwellings, crafts, subsistence practices, trade networks and dietary patterns. Excavations have, for example, helped to clarify the architectural details and function of a “strange structure” depicted in Campbell's sketch (See Image 9) of the interior of the house of the district chief Senosi that has long puzzled researchers.⁸¹ Uncovered house floors (See Image 10), set against historical descriptions,⁸² disclose that it represents an interior compartment that served as a sleeping place for parents in wintertime and also as a storage place of valuable items. A cross-cultural study of various societies has shown that there is a correlation between sociopolitical organisation and the organisation of space and that, as groups become socially and politically more complex, “their use of space and architecture also becomes more segmented”.⁸³ Concomitantly, an analysis of the archaeofaunal sample from the main court midden has challenged historical and ethnographic accounts which claim that the Tswana were traditionally very reluctant to slaughter their domestic stock,

79 J Campbell, *Travels in South Africa undertaken at the request of the London Missionary Society...*, Vol. I, pp. 125, 294.

80 V Ellenberger, “History of the Ba-Ga-Malete of Ramoutsa”, *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, 25, 1937, p. 43; PR Kirby (ed.), *The diary of Dr Andrew Smith*, Vol. 2 (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1940), p. 206. For additional information on De Buys's wanderings north of the Vaal River, see ES van Eeden & PJJ Prinsloo, *Voetspore van pioniers: Buisfontein – 'n Historiese oorsig* (Corals Publishers, Vanderbijlpark, 2010).

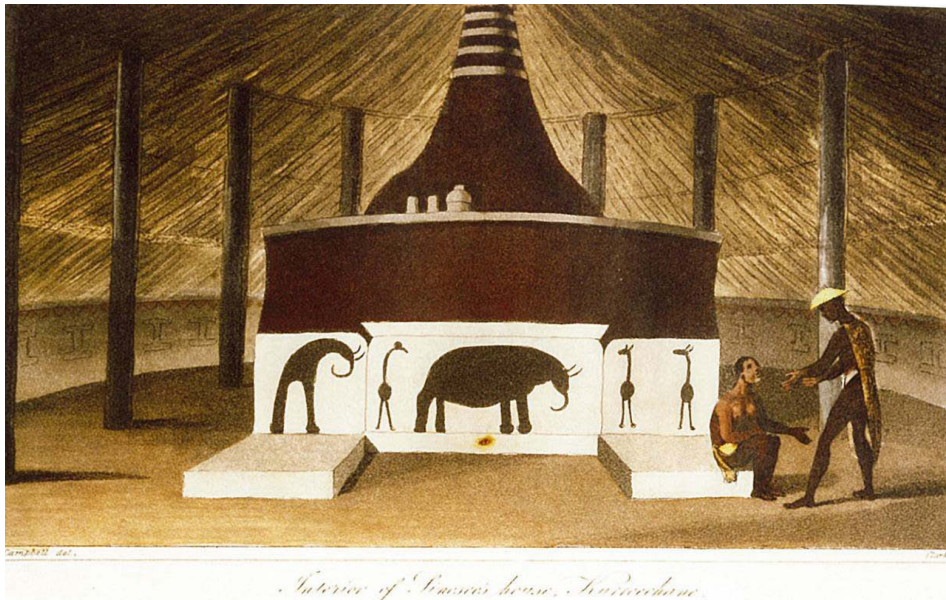
81 F Frescura, “South Africa's ephemeral architecture: An archival view of archaeology without archaeologists” (Paper, Biennial Conference of the Southern African Association of Archaeologists, Wits University, 1988).

82 WJ Burchell, *Travels in the interior of southern Africa*, Vol. II (London, Longman, 1824), p. 365.

83 S Kent, “A cross-cultural study of segmentation, architecture, and the use of space”, S Kent (ed.), *Domestic architecture and the use of space: An interdisciplinary study* (Cambridge, University Press, 1990), p. 150.

but depended mainly on game for their meat supply.⁸⁴ The analysis showed that this pattern did not apply to the upper stratum of Hurutshe society, but that Kaditshwene notables, who gathered daily in the *kgotla* to attend judicial or political meetings, to practise crafts and to enjoy their daily main meal, relied on cattle, sheep and goats for most of their animal protein. Mostly younger animals were slaughtered and, not unexpectedly, the choicest meat cuts landed up on the plates of high-status males.⁸⁵ Again, combining the three different data sets enabled us to construct a fuller picture of life at an almost forgotten and long-lost early Tswana capital.

Image 9: Sketch of the interior of Senosi's house

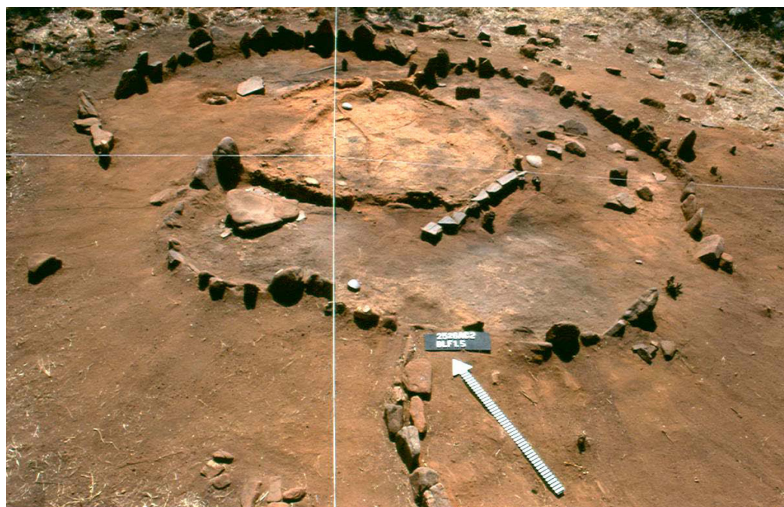


Source: Campbell, 1822, opposite p. 269

84 W Crisp, *The Bechuana of South Africa* (London, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1896), p. 17; A Manson, "The Hurutshe in the Marico district of the Transvaal, 1848-1914" (PhD, UCT, 1990), p. 54; I Schapera, *The Tswana* (London, International African Institute, 1953), p. 25.

85 JCA Boeyens & I Plug, "A chief is like an ash-heap on which is gathered all the refuse': The faunal remains from the central court midden at Kaditshwene", *Annals of the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History*, 1, 2011, pp. 1-22.

Image 10: Excavated house floor in the central ward of Kaditshwene



Source: Photo by Francois Coetzee

Magoro Hill

The third case study, Magoro Hill, demonstrates that the documentary record on inland African societies could be patchy even deep into the nineteenth century and has to be augmented by oral and material evidence.

In August 1865, Magoro Hill,⁸⁶ the capital of a Venda chiefdom south of the Little Letaba River, was the scene of a tragic encounter. An armed force consisting of some 60 Trekkers and about 1000 Tsonga militia besieged the mountain stronghold. The ostensible reasons for the attack were chief Magoro's failure to pay his "opgaaf" (tax or, rather, a form of tribute) and his support for Makhado, the paramount chief of the western Venda, who was embroiled in a conflict with the Schoemansdal community.⁸⁷ The scene

86 Magoro Hill is known as Mbwenda among the Venda.

87 JCA Boeyens, "Die konflik tussen die Venda en die Blankes in Transvaal, 1864-1869", *Archives year book for South African history*, Vol. II (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1990), pp. 36-39. The hub of the Trekker settlement was the town of Schoemansdal, which was established in May 1848 and abandoned in July 1867 after a protracted conflict with the Venda. Trekker authorities divided local African communities into labour-providing and tributary chiefs. "Opgaaf" had to be paid in the form of cattle, ivory, leopard skins, iron hoes or copper rods. The collection of tribute in the eastern and southern Soutpansberg was entrusted to João Albasini, the local superintendent of African chiefdoms who also became known as the 'white chief of the Magwamba' because he gathered a large number of Tsonga refugees from Mozambique around him who had fled Soshangane's Gaza Ngoni kingdom. JB De Vaal, "Die rol van João Albasini in die geskiedenis van die Transvaal", *Archives year book for South African history*, Vol. I (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1953).

of the battle was captured in a painting (See Image 11) by a visiting hunter-trader, Alexander Struben, who also kept a journal in which the campaign is described in detail.⁸⁸ When the Trekker commando reached the hill on 8 August, it had already been surrounded by the Tsonga force, as a result of which the Venda were cut off from the nearby river. Negotiations about the payment of “opgaaf” (‘tribute’) and the surrendering of guns failed and the chief’s son and one of the two councillors who accompanied him to the laager were put to death. The hill was eventually captured on Sunday 13 August 1865.

Image 11: Alexander Struben’s sketch of the battle at Magoro Hill



Source: Courtesy of the late Mrs R Krause

More than 300 occupants of Magoro Hill lost their lives in the encounter. The returning commando also carried off more than 200 cattle, as well as a number of young women and 120 children. They were taken to the farm of João Albasini, one of the leaders of the commando, where the women were distributed among the Tsonga militia and the children were divided among the burghers to be indentured as so-called apprentices. Early Trekker Soutpansberg was not only known for the large amounts of elephant ivory that were exported annually, it also became notorious because of its export of so-called “black ivory”, this being the hundreds of African children captured

⁸⁸ Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Pretoria, A595, Le Roux Smith- Le Roux Accession, AB Struben Diary, 1865. “Account of the wanderings, from Durban to the interior of South Africa, of one Alexander Betts Struben”.

after military campaigns.⁸⁹

Except for the fact that Magoro was a tributary chief who annually had to pay “opgaaf” to the Trekkers, the documentary archive for the period before the attack is largely silent about this community. The oral record on this contact period site is equally disappointing. The only directly relevant account is an oral testimony published in 1981 by Wilfred Phophi, a long-time assistant of state ethnologist NJ van Warmelo.⁹⁰ The context of its recording is unknown and the information on especially the nineteenth century is extremely shallow. Despite references to the broader conflict between the Venda, the Trekkers and their African allies, no mention is made in the account of the 1865 attack on Magoro Hill. The oral testimony also recounts that the hill was uninterruptedly occupied by the Magoro community until they were uprooted in the 1950s during the creation of the Gazankulu homeland. The incumbent Magoro chief could point out the living quarters of several chiefs who had ruled from the hill, thus reaffirming the complicated settlement history of the site.⁹¹

Although we were therefore dealing with a historical site, the paucity of the documentary and the oral evidence necessitated an integrated, multi-source approach. A collaborative project of collecting oral traditions and histories has been initiated in tandem with a documentary search, the latter focusing in particular on the period post-dating the 1865 conflict. Simultaneously, the archaeological investigation is aimed at obtaining a better understanding of the settlement’s layout and occupational sequence. After mapping the more than 300 stone-walled terraces on the hill, areas identified and linked in the extant oral tradition with specific chiefly periods of rule were targeted for excavation.

Two examples illustrate how the different data sets can inform each other and direct the historical enquiry. According to the oral geography, no Magoro chief had his residence on the western side of the hill. Though Struben’s painting depicts burning houses on the steep western incline, there is no oral recollection of who occupied this section of the hill or whether it had indeed been settled prior to the 1865 attack. Convergent verification is

89 JCA Boeyens, “Black ivory’...”, EA Eldredge & F Morton (eds), *Slavery in South Africa...*, pp. 187-214; JCA Boeyens, “Die konflik ...”, *Archives year book for South African history*, Vol. II, pp. 36-39.

90 WMD Phophi, “Vuhosi ha vha ha Magoro”, *Muvenda! Dzhenala ya birou ya Tshivenda*, 8(2), 1981, pp. 14-18.

91 Namadzavho Amos Magoro. He was born in 1949 at Magoro Hill and succeeded his father, Eric Muthombeni Magoro, in 1977. He is currently resident in Masakona and has the official status of a headman (*gota*).

provided by excavations of terraced enclosures on the western slope, which have uncovered well-fired house floors, together with glass trade beads and European ceramics that date to the Schoemansdal period (See Image 12). Altogether, the evidence suggests that Magoro Hill was the base of a far more populous chiefdom before the devastating battle of 1865 than this dynasty's current small following and diminished headmanship status denote.⁹²

Image 12: Well-fired house floor on the western slope of Magoro Hill



Source: Photo by Francois Coetzee

Image 13: Brick-built structure on the eastern side of Magoro Hill



Source: Photo by Francois Coetzee

⁹² See documents submitted to the Commission on Traditional Leadership Disputes and Claims in 2005 by the Magoro Royal Family in the private possession of the current leader of the Magoro dynasty, Namadzavho Amos Magoro. Copies made available to the author on 12 May 2010.

In the case of the post-1865 occupation of Magoro Hill there is an apparent conflict between the material, oral and documentary evidence. The oral geography associates chief Manzinzini with a rectilinear brick-built structure on a stone-walled terrace high up on the eastern side of the hill (See Image 13). Contemporary documentary sources indicate that Manzinzini had passed away sometime before 1877,⁹³ while oral testimonies place the residence of his successor, Mudubu, some distance away to the south on a lower terrace. Hence, the retrieval of some selenium-coloured, moulded glass beads from Manzinzini's supposed bedroom poses a chronological problem. Cadmium sulphoselenide, the pigment used to colour the bright red beads, became commercially available only in the early twentieth century, a date that does not tally with Manzinzini's period of rule.⁹⁴ The apparent dissonance between the oral geography, the dynastic chronology and the material signature should therefore be revisited. This again demonstrates that, while the spoken and written records can serve to contextualise and steer the archaeological enquiry, the material record, in turn, can be used to test and calibrate the oral historical and text-based settlement chronologies and enhance our reconstruction of life and interaction on the nineteenth-century Soutpansberg frontier.

Conclusions

The historical entanglement of peoples and their records in the South African interior necessitates a comparative, multi-source approach to the study of the more recent past. Archaeology, oral tradition and history are indispensable, albeit sometimes inconstant, companions in attempts to bridge the somewhat arbitrary divide between precolonial and colonial African history. Researchers should be aware of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of each discipline, as well as the different control mechanisms provided by them, before proceeding to integrate the different data sets. While the greatest discoveries and new insights might often be obtained at the point of disjuncture between the material, oral and documentary sources, the greatest confidence in our interpretations follows when the different strands of evidence converge and are verified in a coherent account.

93 R Wessmann, "Magoro", *Berliner Missionsberichte*, 23/24, 1890, pp. 500-501.

94 LC Prinsloo, JCA Boeyens, MM van der Ryst & G Webb, "Raman signatures of the modern pigment (Zn,Cd)S_{1-x}Se_x and glass matrix of a red bead from Magoro Hill, an archaeological site in Limpopo Province, South Africa, recalibrate the settlement chronology", *Journal of Molecular Structure*, in press, 2012 (available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.molstruc.2012.03.047>).

Recorded oral traditions can play a fundamental role in historicising the so-called Late Iron Age and in ascribing a historical identity to countless sites in the South African interior. Oral accounts, through which political lineages can be connected with specific precolonial African towns or homesteads, thus provide explicit historical contexts that can be explored and tested by the methods and discoveries of archaeology. Even deep into the nineteenth century, the documentary record on African societies is often sparse, and oral tradition and archaeology thus offer an alternative and insider's perspective on underrepresented or marginalised groups. Historical archaeology has been widely identified as a useful interdisciplinary and capacitating framework for integrating the different data sets in order to produce a more textured and inclusive account of a complex recent African past.