

# HUNTER-GATHERERS ON THE MAPUNGUBWE LANDSCAPE

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In memory of Bronwen van Doornum\*

**The archaeology of the middle Limpopo Valley**, which includes eastern Botswana, northern South Africa and south-western Zimbabwe, is best known for its Iron Age archaeology (Fig. 1). This is perhaps expected because found here is Mapungubwe, a hilltop site that was the capital of southern Africa's first state-level farmer society c. AD 1220 to 1300 (Huffman 2007). However, the local archaeological record extends back quite some time before the appearance of complex societies and the occupation of Mapungubwe. While farming communities arrived at least by AD 900, the earliest evidence of a hunter-gatherer occupation is found to be as far back as 12 000 years ago. This is sometimes overlooked despite the rich cultural material that has been found, the extensive rock art sequence and the intriguing 'disappearance' of hunter-gatherer archaeological remains about the same time that the Mapungubwe state declined.

Studying hunter-gatherer and farmer interactions on this landscape is vitally important. Usually hunter-gatherers encountered incoming communities that had already undergone state formation processes, such as was the case when Europeans arrived in Australia and North America. However, in the middle Limpopo Valley hunter-gatherers witnessed and possibly partook in the political, economic and social activities of farmers that ultimately led or contributed to the establishment of the Mapungubwe state.

The hunter-gatherer techno-complex, or Later Stone Age (LSA), comprises small stone tools often less than 25 mm in length, a wide range of formal tools, bored or digging stones, ostrich egg and land-snail shell beads, various forms of jewellery and ornamentation, grinding stones, evidence of hafting stone tools

to handles, ceramics in the later phases, and rock art (Lombard et al., 2012). The hunter-gatherer sequence of the middle Limpopo Valley appears to largely conform to findings made in other parts of southern Africa, and is presently known through finds made in South Africa as well as Botswana. Some work has been conducted in Zimbabwe but these findings have not yet featured strongly in more recent studies. That said, the sequence here does appear to host a rich and substantial archaeological record, including a number of rock art sites. One imagines that the area will reveal interesting finds if it sees some archaeological research in the future. Nevertheless, we have

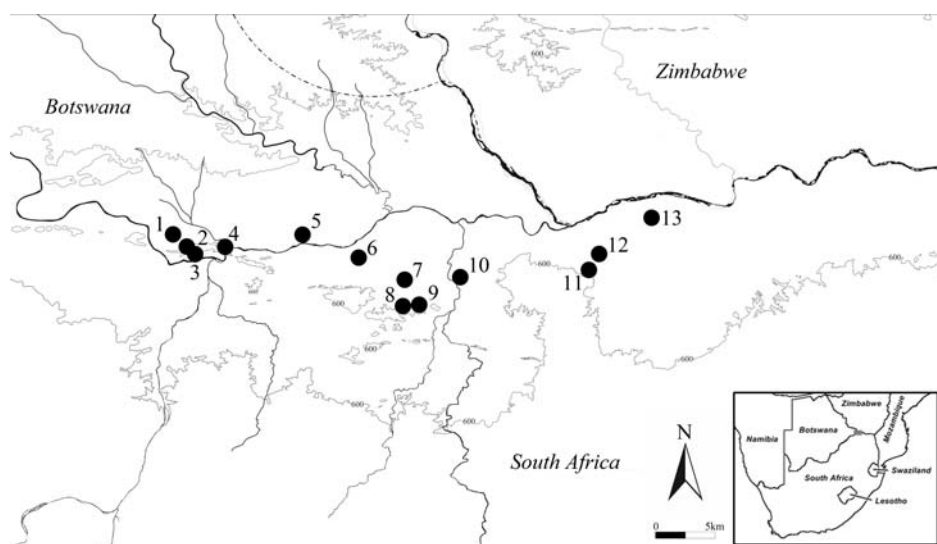


Fig. 1: The middle Limpopo valley with some prominent sites and those mentioned in the text. 1 Dzombo Shelter; 2 Mmamagwa; 3 João Shelter; 4 Kambaku Camp; 5 Mafunyane Shelter; 6 Tshisiku Shelter; 7 Balerno Main Shelter; 8 Balerno Shelter 3; 9 Balerno Shelter 2; 10 Little Muck Shelter; 11 Bambandyanalo (K2); 12 Mapungubwe; 13

a fair grasp of the local hunter-gatherer material signature.

## The middle Limpopo's hunter-gatherer sequence

Until quite recently, very little was known of the middle Limpopo Valley's LSA sequence, despite the extensive rock art surveys conducted by Ed Eastwood and his team since the early 1990s (Fig. 2). Their findings led Simon Hall and Ben Smith (2000) to excavate Little Muck Shelter (Fig. 3), which has a faded but extensive rock art sequence containing hunter-gatherer motifs as well as a deep archaeological deposit. These excavations revealed an occupation spanning the past 2 000 years marked by several significant changes. At first it seems the site

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was used as a residential camp, but around AD 350 when farmers started settling in the extended region it became a part-time workshop. However, when the first wide-spread farming occupation of the middle Limpopo Valley occurred around AD 900, the shelter became an intense craft production site, probably because of increasing trade with farmers. From around AD 1000, Hall and Smith (2000) argue, the site was abandoned and occupied by farmers who wished to gain access to the hunter-gatherers' spiritual power. Their work was the inspiration for Bronwen van Doornum's South African-based doctoral study (2005), as well as my own in eastern Botswana (Forssman, 2014).

The site with the greatest time depth is Balerno Main Shelter (Van Doornum, 2008), a site on a farm now part of the Mapungubwe National Park. Here the earliest evidence of a hunter-gather occupation was recorded at around 11000 BC. However, the site was only occupied for around 5 000 years until about 6000 BC, when it appears to have been abandoned and only reoccupied between 210 and 100 BC. During Balerno Main's occupation hiatus, another site excavated by Van Doornum (2007) was settled around 6000 BC. It is known as Tshisiku Shelter.

While the assemblage attributes at both sites are similar, they revealed different patterns: at Tshisiku the number of artefacts declines over the course of the site's occupation, whereas at Balerno Main they remain consistently high and particularly diverse but fairly unchanging. Van Doornum (2008) suggested that the reason this occurred at Balerno Main was because the site served as an aggregation camp: a site used when different hunter-gatherer communities congregated at specific times of the year to perform rituals, maintain alliance networks, feast and marry. Van Doornum also excavated two smaller shelters on the farm Balerno and argued that these sites were used when hunter-gatherers were not aggregating.

An interesting picture thus emerged at different South African sites. At some it seems hunter-gatherers lived a more traditional life, whereas Little Muck was used as a trading base or workshop, and the smaller Balerno sites served as 'satellite' camps. However, not included in any of the more recent studies was the excavation at Tuli Lodge in Botswana and several other sites in Zimbabwe. This inadvertently created a boundary; on one side of the Limpopo was Mapungubwe and various research programmes, while on the other lay the archaeologically rich but 'research barren' Botswanan and Zimbabwean landscapes.

This became the motivation for a renewed research focus in eastern Botswana. The aim of that study was to excavate small sites that are usually ignored and place them into the broader sequence. As perhaps expected, some of these sites yielded little useable data. However, others provided interesting insights into the region's hunter-gatherer sequence. Dzombo

Shelter offered the greatest depth of time at a few centuries beyond 2 000 years ago. While the assemblage largely conforms to the regional sequence, it provides evidence of shifting behavioural patterns in hunter-gatherer lifeways. At the site, backed tools, which possess steeply flaked edges opposite a sharp edge to facilitate hafting, increase from AD 350 and decline slightly around 900, but still remain proportionately high until about 1220.

The occurrence of fractures in these stone tools consistent with those identified in hunting experiments indicates that the increase in these artefacts may be linked to more regular hunting activities. The fact that this corresponds with the local appearance of farming communities may suggest that the shifts are linked to their relationship with hunter-gatherers living at Dzombo, possibly reflecting increased trade or changing settlement and access patterns. These findings beg the question whether hunter-gatherers across the landscape were responding to contact in the same way, or whether the outcomes of their relations were situational and varied between sites.

These questions have, in part, contributed to renewed interest in the Little Muck assemblage. Here a massive proportion of scraping tools (398) versus backed tools (27) were recovered. This is in complete contrast with Dzombo at 82 and 65 respectively (see Fig. 4). Preliminary investigations into the use of the Little Muck scrapers by studying polish, residue, rounding, edge damage and macro-fractures on the individual tools suggest they were used to work a variety of materials, including wet and dry as well as burnt wood and animal hides. Using tool forms to show this does not necessarily provide the right answers since morphologically different tools might have been used for the same activities or, as Karim Sadr (2015) recently argued, might indicate different ethnic communities. Early indications at Little Muck are promising even though the study is still in its infancy and suggests that it is possible to identify differences in craft, production and behavioural practices between different hunter-gatherer camps if the trace evidence is considered.

Hall and Smith (2000) suggested that the relationship between hunter-gatherers and farmers affected change within the LSA record, a conclusion supported in both Van Doornum's (2005) and my own (2014) doctoral studies. They also argued that Little Muck was appropriated by farmers wishing to incorporate hunter-gatherer spiritual power into their own ritual structures. However, it could be asked whether the replacement of the LSA material culture by a farmer-associated assemblage does perhaps not indicate assimilation.

In Botswana, João Shelter is an open-air farmer settlement with a rock shelter occupied by hunter-gatherers at the 'back' of the settlement. It seems both were used at the same time. This might have occurred



Fig. 2: Koaxa's Shelter, one of Ed Eastwood's favourite rock art sites in the area, has over 200 images and more than 16 different species painted in the 25 m long shelter. Open to the public by appointment.

during periods of exchange or at specific times of the year. One could also speculate on the rules that may have existed, for example with hunter-gatherers being restricted to certain areas of the settlement such as the rock shelter, but with limited data it is not possible to say anything for certain. João dates to between AD 1000 and 1220, which is around the same time that Hall and Smith (2000) propose Little Muck was appropriated by farmers. Therefore, in other parts of the landscape, hunter-gatherers were spending periods of time in farmer settlements. This may represent the process of assimilation. Little Muck could also be an example of this; after all, farmers are not known to occupy rock shelters.

It might be difficult to imagine hunter-gatherers becoming 'farmers' but it is certainly possible. At Kam-baku Camp, also in Botswana, a farmer settlement was excavated that possessed a small stone-tool assemblage. They were found in a small midden at the back of the settlement near a shallow overhang in what may have been the residential area. Another assemblage was recovered from within the cattle kraal along with Icon (1300–1450) and Khami (1450–1820s) ceramics. A radiocarbon date places the site's occupation between AD 1480 and 1650, which is in the early phase of the Khami period. Thus, if the stone tools were produced by hunter-gatherers, and they do indeed appear morphologically similar to examples from rock-shelter excavations, it indicates that by this time some hunter-gatherers were living as 'farmers' or in fixed settlements. Interestingly, when early travellers such as Thomas Elton and Samuel Dornan passed through the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s they noted that hunter-gatherers were living in fixed settlements and cultivating fields. These historical accounts may support the archaeological evidence. Considering these findings, the possible assimilation of hunter-gatherers into a farming system at Little Muck does not seem impossible and warrants further investigation, which is, in fact, currently under-way.

It is also possible that some hunter-gatherers chose to continue living a hunting and gathering existence despite contact with farmers. Anecdotally, a Zimbabwean landowner once told me that until the 1950s he and his family would every so often have hunter-gatherer groups live temporarily on their land. The Eastwood's also had informants tell them that until about the same time, hunter-gatherers were present in Bechuanaland and Zimbabwe (Eastwood & Eastwood, 2006). For example, a Venda in-

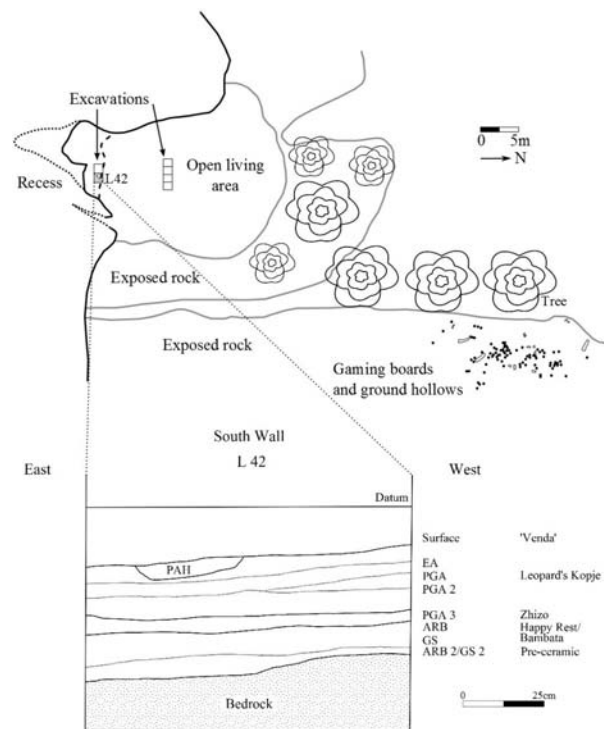


Fig. 3: The layout of the Little Muck site showing the location of the excavated units. Unit L42 is currently under further investigation.

formant mentioned that hunter-gatherers would appear to trade for goods such as tobacco when traveling through the area. In Zimbabwe there was also a hill known as 'The Hill of the Bushmen' where they would gather to dance, and possibly exchange and feast. After the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century there are no recollections of Bushmen in the region, possibly because they no longer lived as hunter-gatherers, inter-married or vacated the region.

Nevertheless, while archaeologically we have few remains indicating that hunter-gatherers lived in the area after 1300, there is evidence suggesting that at least some did. It might be that those who did not assimilate lived in very small groups, in restricted areas and left little behind. Perhaps even our research focus on rock shelters is creating a bias; we interpret a disappearance but what we are really seeing may be a shift to open-air camps. It is possible that some chose to assimilate, few maintained traditional lifeways and others left the area altogether.

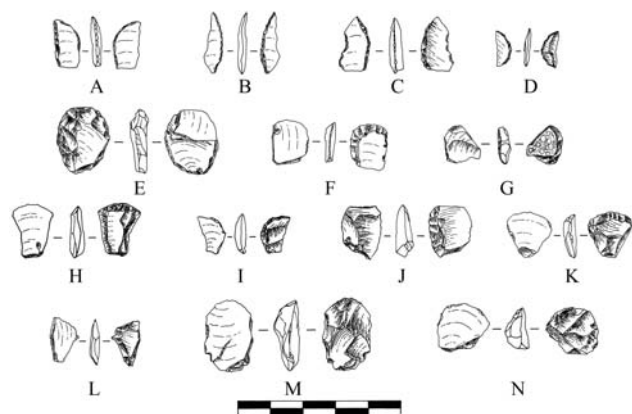


Fig. 4: Examples of scrapers and backed tools from Dzombo Shelter that predate 2000 BP: A-D, I & L, backed tools; E-H, J, K & N, small scrapers (<20 mm); and M, medium scraper (20-30 mm).

### Taking LSA research forward

Where to next? We have asked what happened in the Mapungubwe area and looked at it from two angles: the one side investigated larger rock shelters whereas the other attempted to expand this research by studying a variety of different site types. In so doing, a fairly thorough understanding of the LSA has been achieved. However, there are still many questions that need attention. For example, while we have acknowledged the influence farmers had on hunter-gatherers, we have not yet grappled with the complexity of their interaction. How did exchange practices influence craft production? Did hunter-gatherer behaviour change and how is this archaeologically visible? What happens to hunter-gatherers when their material culture 'disappears'?

We have also restricted most of our research to South Africa or (more recently) Botswana, but do not yet know what the archaeology of the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area in south-western Zimbabwe will reveal. Work here will potentially offer further insights into how hunter-gatherers fitted into the farming economy. Since it was here that reports from the 20<sup>th</sup> century mention the occurrence of hunter-gatherer communities, it might be the area we need to turn to if we want to examine what happened to them in more

recent centuries. There is also a need to develop our archaeological methodology. Digging more sites and asking the same questions will not help; we need to start thinking about new and innovative ways of looking at 'contact archaeology'. This is already happening in studies looking at the hunter-gatherer sequence in the east-coast trade corridor, or in linking the Botswanan and South African landscapes in an attempt to determine if social, cultural or political boundaries existed in local hunter-gatherer societies.

The region amply demonstrates the complex sets or arrangements present in LSA projects. Those actively engaged in related research need to study a variety of strands of evidence before piecing together appropriate prehistories. This is not the only area in which such challenges are being grappled with. Settlement change, interaction, technological shifts, subsistence patterns and exchange practices, let alone topics within the field of rock art, are just some of the themes currently under investigation across southern Africa. If anything, LSA research is currently witnessing a diaspora of research topics and agendas, with many scholars employing state-of-the-art and innovative techniques to study the past 20 000 years of hunter-gatherer archaeology. Current debates in the field are becoming highly advanced, such as the examination of ethnographic analogy, the application of various theoretical perspectives and the contribution research is making towards transformation agendas. The LSA archaeology of the middle Limpopo Valley is contributing to this diffusion of research ideas and the results are helping to refine the identity of southern Africa's hunter-gatherer people.

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