

Field and Technical Report

A TSWANA STONE-WALLED STRUCTURE NEAR STERKFRONTEIN CAVES IN THE CRADLE OF HUMANKIND

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ABSTRACT

The Cradle of Humankind is known for sites such as Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Drimolen and Kromdraai, among others, that offer a detailed understanding of the Plio-Pleistocene. However, the 'Tswana' stone-walled structures that are found in this landscape have seen comparatively less research. We present preliminary results from an ongoing mapping and research programme on the farm Project 58 where a multi-component settlement is located. The site is composed of several distinct areas, a partially crenated boundary wall design, kraals located inside and outside the settlement, and internal housing and grain bin structures. Based on the architecture of the stone-walled structure, the site was most likely occupied between AD 1450 and 1700 and appears similar to Taylor's (1979) Group I sites. Studying the more recent past of this region reclaims a history that has been disarticulated from the landscape.

Keywords: stone-walled structures, Iron Age, Tswana, Cradle of Humankind.

INTRODUCTION

The Cradle of Humankind is globally recognised for its Plio-Pleistocene palaeontological and archaeological sequences. Since the 1930s, cave sites have been excavated to study the behaviour and evolutionary development of hominins (Caruana & Stratford 2019). Much of this knowledge has been generated from studies concentrated at Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Drimolen and Kromdraai (see Lombard *et al.* 2012 for a list of karstic cave sites and dates). Considerably less work has examined the landscape above these well-studied cave systems, which preserves very different cultural sequences and identities (Caruana & Stratford 2019; but for examples of nearby studies, see Mason 1962, 1973, 1981; Wadley 1987, 1996; Steel 1988; Blundell *et al.* 2016). Like many other areas of South Africa, the Sterkfontein landscape saw forced evictions during the apartheid era under the country's 1913 Natives Land Act, removing African people from the area and handing ownership to European-descent groups (Dubow 1989). Prior to this, the South African War (1899–1901) and *difaqane* conflicts, including the period leading up to this (early 18th to early 19th century), led to mass displacement and turmoil, heavily impacting the lives of many in the country's interior as well as in the area around Sterkfontein (De Beer 2006; Morton 2008; Croucamp & Roberts 2011). Yet, to date, these histories in the Cradle of Humankind have hardly seen any archaeological attention.

This study presents the findings from a recent investigation at a stone-walled structure (SWS) in the Sterkfontein Valley. Studies conducted in the valley have global importance, and in a national framework, the 'Tswana'¹ occupation speaks directly

to a traumatic past, including colonial oppression and racial policies. Ignoring these histories perpetuates the historical prioritisation of hominin evolution and early technologies at the expense of more local/regional histories (Kusimba 2009; Schmidt 2009; Lane 2011). We aim to present the Sterkfontein Valley as a multifaceted archaeological landscape that includes pasts hardly acknowledged by previous researchers.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TSWANA HISTORY

The origin of the 'Tswana' remains unclear. 'Tswana' communities are thought to have migrated in 'small-scale scattered movements' (Legassick 1969; Ngcongco 1979: 25), eventually arriving in what is now the Free State, Gauteng and North West provinces of South Africa, and southern Botswana (Jordaan 2016; Fig. 1). This is represented by the local appearance of Ntsuanatsatsi ceramics in the 15th century. However, some argue that 'Tswana' origins are linked to Nguni groups, and Huffman (2002) suggested early 'Tswana' communities moved through KwaZulu-Natal before settling the highveld. Supporting this are similarities in oral histories and ceramics between Fokeng, a Tswana lineage, and 'Nguni' groups (Mitchell & Whitelaw 2005: 227; Huffman 2007: 436; Boeyens & Hall 2009: 460; Hall 2012). In some instances, what Hall (2012) called 'Nguni-ness' existed in otherwise 'Tswana' communities and this might be linked to economic and specialist roles, such as the Tlokwa metal specialists. To Hall (2012), the region was historically layered with no single 'Tswana' identity.

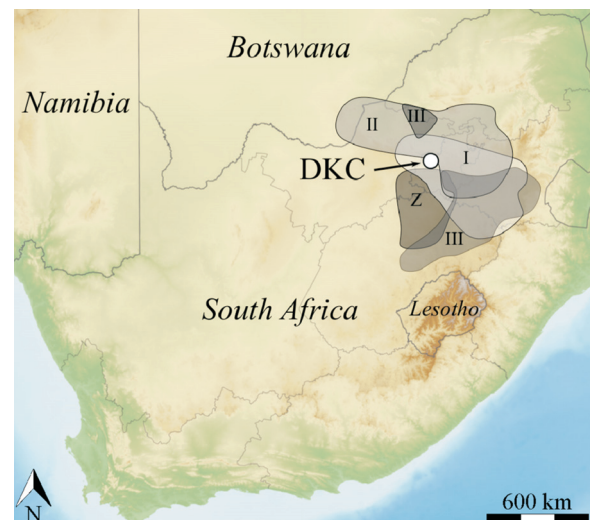


FIG. 1. The distribution of Taylor's (1979) SWS types, Groups I, II and III, and Maggs' (1976a,b) Type-Z. The white shaded area is the ceramic distribution of Ntsuanatsatsi and Uitkomst (based on Huffman 2002: 16 & 19). DKC refers to Driefontein Koppie Complex, the study site.