The Entangled Past: Integrating Archaeology, Oral Tradition

and History in the South African Interior

INAUGURAL LECTURE

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1.   Introduction

The eighteenth and nineteenth 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 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.

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. In this address, I will explore 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 multi-source approach across disciplinary boundaries is essential to achieve a full and seamless account of late precolonial and early colonial African history. I will argue, 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 (1986:351-478) in the 1970s uncovered the foundations of no fewer than 83 houses and tested 15 middens, which altogether yielded a rich body of evidence comprising faunal and floral remains, ceramics, beads, metal implements and jewellery, cosmetic ore, as well as human burials. 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 (Breutz 1954:50-51; TNA 1905:15).[i]

2.   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 (1965/1985), David Henige (1982), Joseph Miller (1980), and others. 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 (Bonner 1983; Delius 1984; Guy 1982; Maggs 1976 & Peires 1981). 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 (Mason 1985; Parkington & Cronin 1979). However, in the long run these initiatives remained rather eclectic and failed to develop into a coordinated interdisciplinary study of the recent past.

Interest in the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-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 nineteenth-century African polities, turned their attention to what they perceived as the more pressing issues of contemporary politics and struggle history (Bonner et al 2008:5; Wright 2010:280). 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 (Reid 2011:136; Stahl 2009:243).[ii]

Since the mid-2000s there has been a return of interest in interdisciplinary cooperation and in the study of the late precolonial and early colonial periods in the southern African interior. In 2004, 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" (Reid & Lane 1984:6). 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, those that are not remembered or represented in oral or written accounts (Reid & Lane 1984:9-10).

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 (Swanepoel et al 2008:vi-vii; Bonner et al 2008:13). Contributions to the first conference, *Identity in formation: the last 500 years*, were published in a volume entitled *Five hundred years rediscovered: Southern African precedents and prospects* (Swanepoel et al 2008).[iii] 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 relegated the history of African societies to a 20-page appendix. In her review of *Five hundred years rediscovered*, veteran historian Shula Marks (2011:138-139), perhaps somewhat over-optimistically and simplistically,[iv] 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.

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 (2011:135) 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 (2011:136), 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". The shift in historical interest in the 1980s to the colonial era was perhaps inevitable and necessary in an increasingly independent Africa, but this has precluded historians from taking cognisance of the "very real continuities in African identities from the precolonial past", as well as from engaging with the steady contributions made by archaeologists to the study of the precolonial period (Reid 2011:148).

3.   Disciplinary strengths and weaknesses

According to Reid and Lane (2004:9) the "'constructed' and partial nature of all historical sources" necessitates an awareness of their strengths and limitations before attempting comparison and integration. This would ensure that the different data sets are not prematurely integrated before each has been analysed on its own terms within its own disciplinary framework (Vansina 1995:396).

Archaeology

As noted by James Deetz (1988:363), archaeology provides us with a repository of material culture, the "commonplace quality" of which often remains unrecorded and which sheds light on everyday life. 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 (Hodder 2011). 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 (2004:15), therefore, the material record is "unfettered by disjointed and disabling, artificial historical divisions", but remains "a constant source of information" on precolonial, colonial and postcolonial worlds, thus serving as "an important foil to the thrusts of history".

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 and direct than written records, where the compilers generally have their contemporaries and sometimes their legacy in mind (Vansina 1995:384). 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 (Stahl 2009:241). 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 (Vansina 1995:375).

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. 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 (Vansina 1995:397).[v] 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 dissimilar" and therefore difficult to reconcile (Robertshaw 2000:271).

Oral tradition

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" (Mason 2000:240). 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 (Walker 1997). The neck of the hourglass reflects the middle period, which serves mainly as a 'charter' for the current social order (Mason 2000:258; Spear 1981:166-167). 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.

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 (Spear 1981:171-172). Their historicity is not only eroded by the passage of time, but their evidential value can also be affected by selection, reinterpretation, feedback, lengthening and telescoping, all of which are often dictated by current sociopolitical constraints. 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.[vi]

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 (Mason 2000:249). 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 (1985:196), oral traditions constitute important primary hypotheses that have to be confirmed by independent data such as that uncovered by documentary or archaeological research.

One way to overcome the inherent weaknesses of oral traditions as historical source would be to work comparatively as recommended by Schapera (1962:148), 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. 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 (Peires 2010).

Despite their limitations, oral accounts open up an important window onto the past and, as noted by Schapera (1962:147), "even for relatively recent periods they often contain much detail not found in written records ...". 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 (Mason 2000:244). 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 (Morton 2011:61).

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 (Deetz 1988:363; Paynter 2000:14). The argument that documentary evidence is intrinsically more unreliable and biased than the mute and indirect material evidence is perhaps also overstated. As Jeff Peires (2008:68) 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".

It is axiomatic that documentary evidence should be subjected to thorough source and textual criticism to uncover intended or unintended misrepresentations and misinformation. In fact, archaeologists have been criticised for the uncritical and unsophisticated manner in which they have made use of documents without due regard to context and intent. 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 be counterproductive and lead to a neglect of the task of more orthodox historical reconstruction and explanation (Maylam 2000:127). 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" (Peires 2008:70).

Written sources are few and far between for the late precolonial and early contact periods in the South African interior. Even for the more recent period there are "porous barriers between orality and literacy", as highlighted by Lize Kriel (2011:235) in her study of the missionary archive of the nineteenth-century northern Transvaal. 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.[vii] 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.

4.   Transcending disciplinary boundaries: historical archaeology as an enabling framework

Just prior to the launch of the Five Hundred Year Research Initiative, historian Philip Bonner (2005:3) 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 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 (2005:3) 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".[viii] 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'" (Bonner et al 2008:12).[ix]

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 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 (2000:262) 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. 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 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 (Stahl 2009:248). In an essay entitled, *Historical archaeology in Africa: an appropriate concept?*, Graham Connah (2007:36) 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. Connah (2007:38-39) regards historical archaeology as an ambiguous concept that has not really taken on in Europe and with limited relevance when applied to the African past. 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.

5.   Disciplinary intersections: case studies from the interior

The question arises how the three evidential sources should be integrated to unlock the past. 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 (Deetz 1988:363). 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 (Reid & Lane 2004:9-10).[x]

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 (Mason 2000:262). As the following case studies from my own research will 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.

Marothodi

Our 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 (fig 1). Mason (1986:3, 5, 689) 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". Although the site was generally ascribed to Tswana speakers, its real historical identity was uncovered only some twenty years later (Boeyens & Hall 2009).

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 (Ellenberger 1939:172-173, 1940:223; Schapera 1938:xii, 308). 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 (Massie 1905:25-26).[xi] 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 (fig 2). In addition, several copper and tin-bronze earrings were uncovered from house excavations in a prominent settlement unit in the largest chiefly ward (Hall et al 2006:7).

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 (Anderson 2009). 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 (fig 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 (Morton 2011:7-8). 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 (Hall et al 2008:70).

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 ascendency 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 (Huffman 2008:437). Since the forging of new identities is often expressed through material culture (Reid & Lane 2004:23), 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.[xii]

Kaditshwene

Our 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 (1986) 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. 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 (Boeyens 2000). 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 (1820, 1822), 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 (1822:277) 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 (Campbell 1822:221-223, 299).

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 (figs 4 & 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 (fig 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.

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 (1822:227-228) 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. Based on a combination of archaeological, oral and pictorial data (figs 7 & 8), a well-preserved stone ruin complex at this exact geographic location can be associated with a junior branch of the Hurutshe, the BooMokgatlha who, under their leader Senosi, had become subject to Kaditshwene prior to the *difaqane* (Breutz 1953:198). 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.

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 (1822) on his journey to Kaditshwene. 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 (Ellenberger 1937:43; Kirby 1940:206).[xiii]

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 known history 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 (fig 9) of the interior of the house of the district chief Senosi that has long puzzled researchers (Frescura 1988). Uncovered house floors (fig 10), set against historical descriptions (Burchell 1824:365), 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. Cross-cultural studies have 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" (Kent 1990:150). 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, but depended mainly on game for their meat supply (Crisp 1896:17; Manson 1990:54; Schapera 1953:25). 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 (Boeyens & Plug 2011). 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.

Magoro Hill

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

In August 1865, Magoro Hill,[xiv] 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) and his support for Makhado, the paramount chief of the western Venda, who was embroiled in a conflict with the Schoemansdal community.[xv] The scene of the battle was captured in a painting (fig 11) by a visiting hunter-trader, Alexander Struben, who also kept a journal in which the campaign is described in detail (Struben 1865). 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' 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.

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 after military campaigns (Boeyens 1994).

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 the early 1970s by Wilfred Phophi [Sa.], a long-time assistant of state ethnologist N.J. van Warmelo.[xvi] 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 during the creation of the Gazankulu homeland. The incumbent Magoro chief[xvii] could point out the living quarters of several chiefs who had ruled from the hill, thus reaffirming the complicated settlement history of the site.

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 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 (fig 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.

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 Manzinzinzi with a rectangular brick-built structure on a stone-walled terrace high up on the eastern side of the hill (fig 13). Contemporary documentary sources indicate that Manzinzini passed away sometime during the 1880s (Wessmann 1890), while oral testimonies place the

residence of his successor, Mudubu, some distance away to the south on a lower terrace. The retrieval of selenium-coloured red glass beads from Manzinzinzi's bedroom, however, poses a chronological problem. Selenium was first introduced in bead-making in 1891 (Francis 2002:75), a date that does not tally with Manzinzinzi's period of rule. 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.

6. 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 indispensible, 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 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.

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 enable us to connect political lineages with specific precolonial African towns or homesteads and 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.

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Fig 1. Aerial view of the main settlement unit at Marothodi.

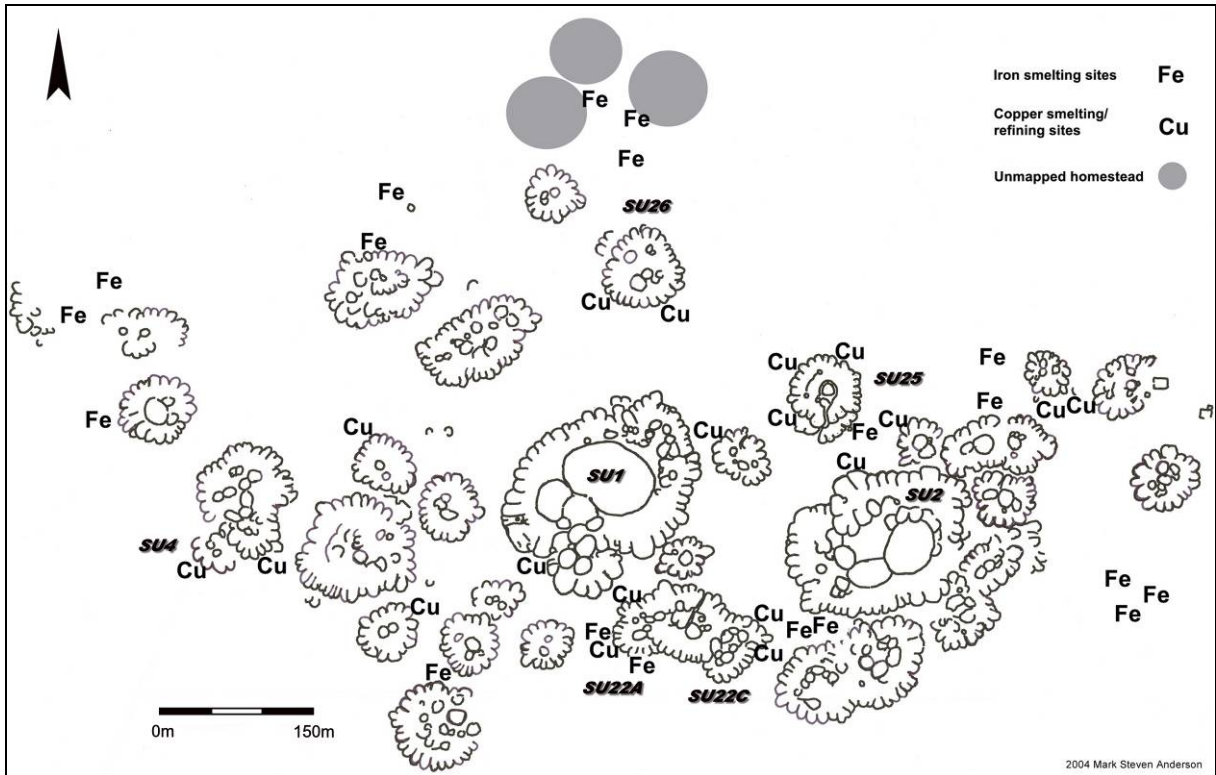Fig 2. Copper crucible furnaces attached to the back courtyard of a household in Marothodi.

Fig 3. Map of the central section of Marothodi (after Hall et al 2006).
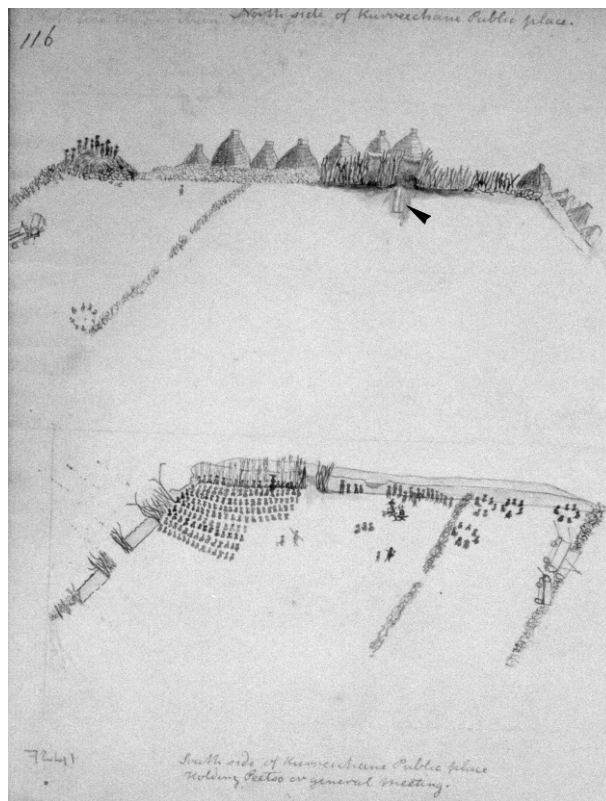

Fig 4. John Campbell's unpublished sketch of the assembly of leaders in the second central court (*kgotla*) of Kaditshwene on 10 May 1820 (MSB77, National Library of South Africa).
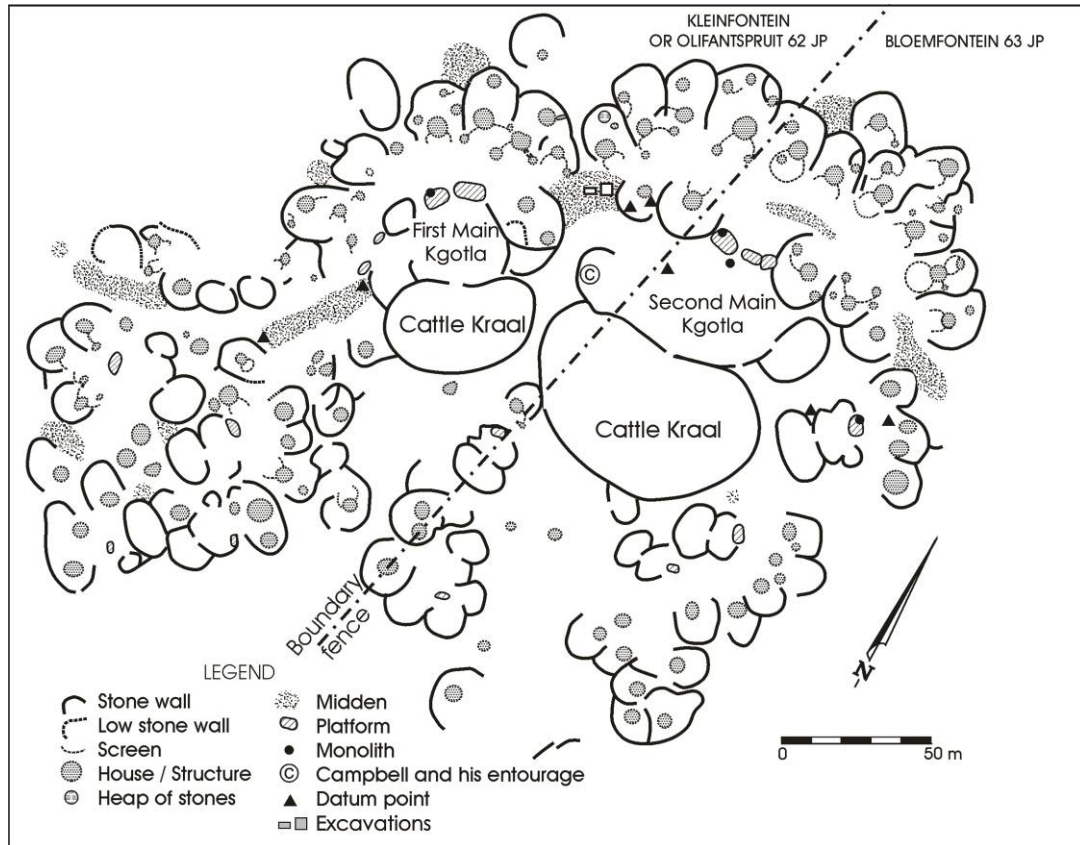
Fig 5. Site plan of the central ward in the *kgosing* (chief's division) of Kaditshwene.

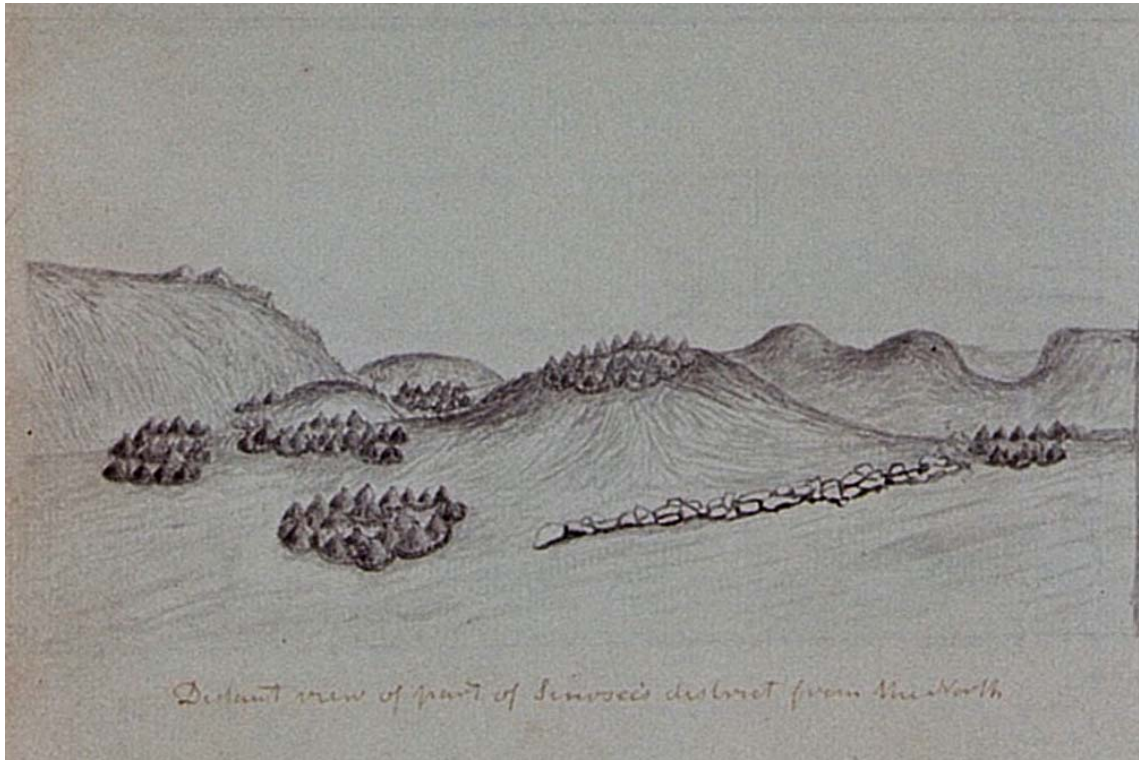Fig 6. The monolith close to the main entrance of the second central court of Kaditshwene.

Fig 7. John Campbell's unpublished sketch of the district of Senosi (MSB77, National Library of South Africa).
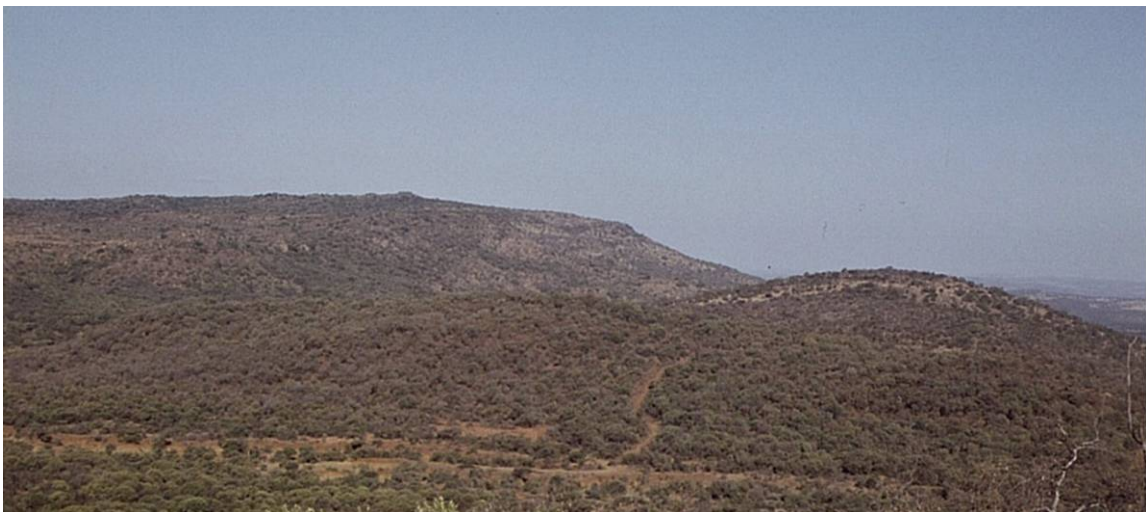

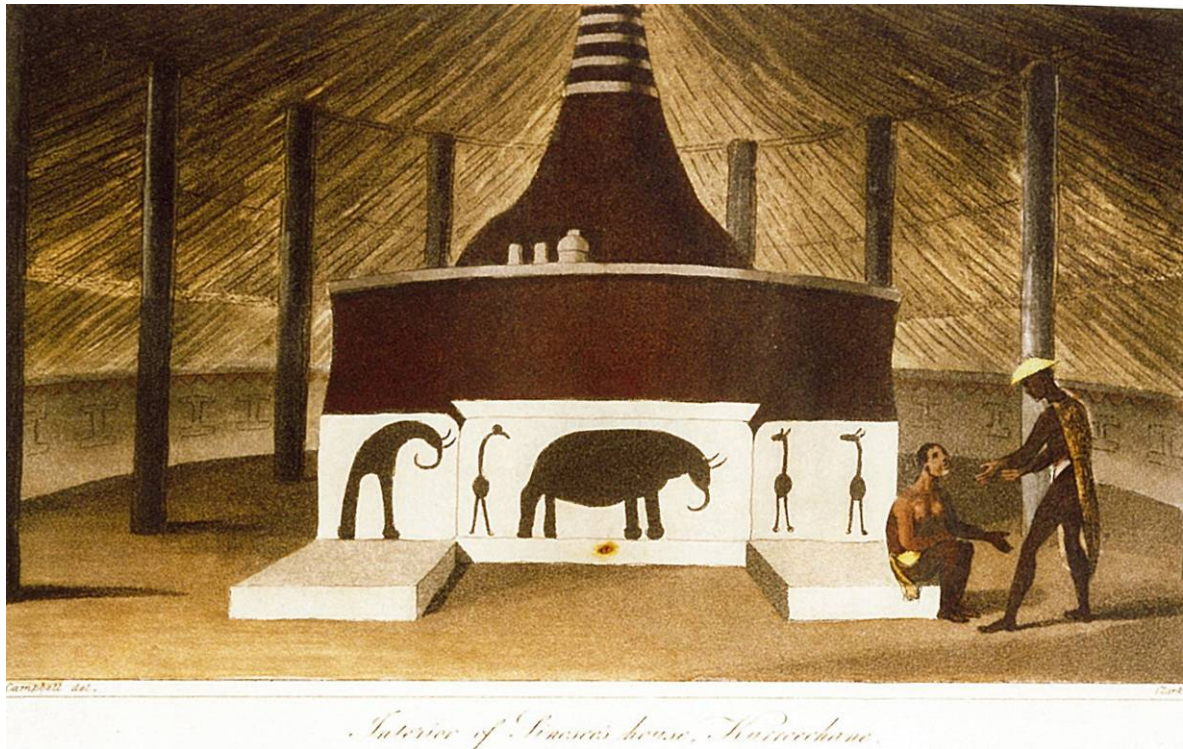Fig 8. View of the location of Senosi's settlement from the north.

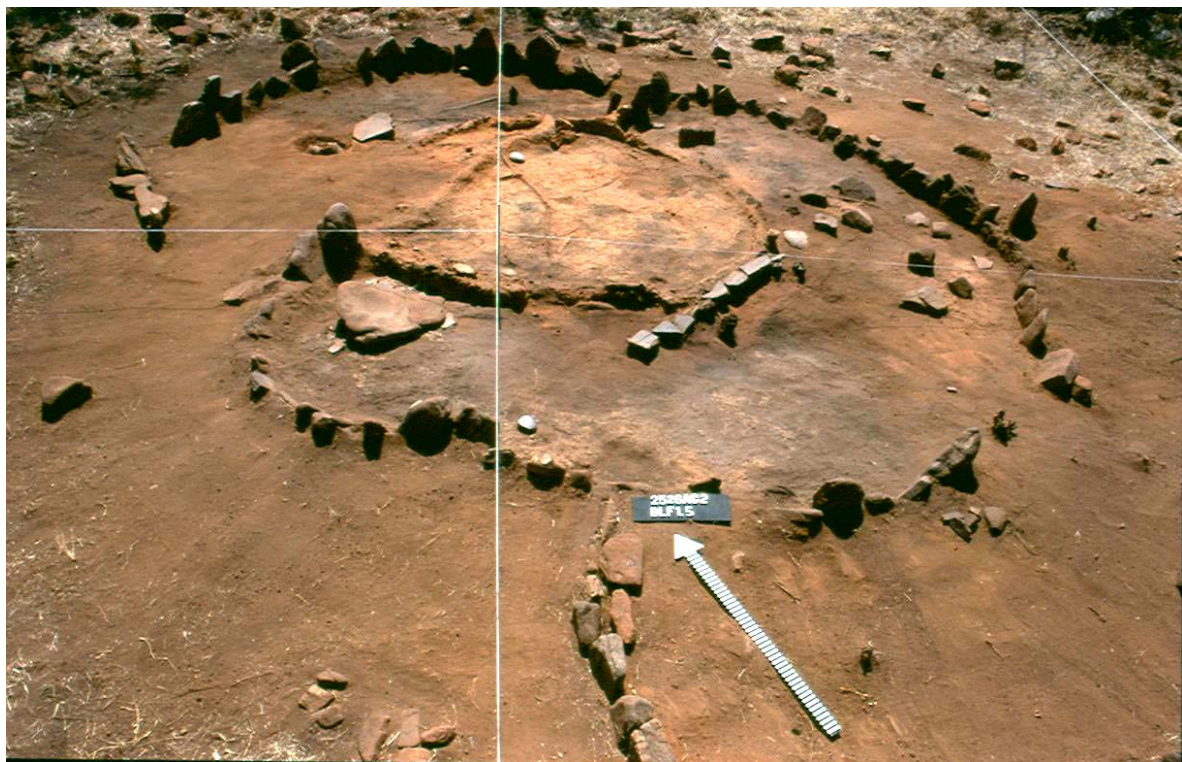Fig 9. Sketch of the interior of Senosi's house (Campbell 1822).

Fig 10. Excavated house floor in the central ward of Kaditshwene.

Fig 11. Alexander Struben's painting of the battle at Magoro Hill, August 1865.

Fig 12. Well-fired house floor on the western slope of Magoro Hill.

Fig 13. Brick-built structure on the eastern side of Magoro Hill that is associated in the oral geography with chief Manzinzinzi.

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[i] Further enquiries are obviously necessary to confirm the specific link between Site 20/71 and Motlhaka-oo-Tshose.

[ii] 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, ie the period since about AD 1650, are of limited use (Vogel & Fuls 1999). Projects are currently under way to explore the applicability of other chronometric dating techniques, such as optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) and archaeomagnetic dating.

[iii] The results of this interdisciplinary initiative have also been disseminated in conference papers and published in journals such as *African Studies* (Delius & Schoeman 2010) and the *South African Historical Journal* (Mulaudzi et al 2010). 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 (Delius & Schoeman 2008). 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 (Maggs 2008). 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 into the Pedi kingdom (Delius & Schoeman 2008). Another set of papers is planned for a forthcoming volume of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.

[iv] The contributors to the *Five hundred years rediscovered* volume, as well as participants in the FYI, do not all speak with one voice and some of them still work within a largely cognitive-processual

paradigm. Both anthropology and history will remain equally essential frameworks to interpret continuity and change in African societies during the more recent past.

[v] 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 (Schrire et al 1993:30).

[vi] 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 (Hamilton 2011). Schapera (1962:147) 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".

[vii] An almost indecipherable letter written by a Soutpansberg notable, Abraham Duvenhage, who simultaneously occupied three important posts, viz. field-cornet, justice of the peace and superintendent of African chiefdoms, during the ill-fated existence of Trekker town of Schoemansdal in the 1860s, serves as an example (Boeyens 1994:209, footnote 34). It is probably precisely for this reason that the study of the largest and most complex of the interior regions, early nineteenth-century Transvaal, has seldom been a popular hunting ground for historians.

[viii] 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 (Behrens & Swanepoel 2008:26).

[ix] In their overview of the prospects of inter- and transdisciplinary research into the last 500 years in the same volume, Behrens and Swanepoel (2008:23) also pointed out that historical archaeology was seen as a "capacitating framework" by most collaborators.

[x] As noted by Paynter (2000:15): "When documents and objects tell different stories, especially stories in which one record is met with silence in the other, this may be due to sample problems, or it may be due to the operations of that past way of life, operations that seek to hide, silence, and thereby dominate. In short, points of mismatch between objects and documents can be used to track the work of social power."

[xi] In the case of Marothodi we had to depend on oral traditions recorded long ago since members of this Tlokwa branch are no longer resident in the area.

[xii] 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.

xiii The Lete, widely known for their prowess as metal workers, subsequently joined the Hurutshe under Senosi at Kaditshwene (Breutz 1953).

xiv Magoro Hill is known as Mbwenda among the Venda.

xv The hub of the Trekker settlement was the town of Schoemansdal, which was established in April 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 (De Vaal 1953).

xvi A copy of the article, Phophi, WMD. [Sa.] (1972?). Vhuhosi ha vha ha Magoro. *Dzhenala ya birou ya* Tshivenda:14-18, was among the documents filed by the Magoro community as part of their land claim on Magoro Hill. We have not yet been able to get hold of a copy of the journal, which was issued by the Venda homeland government.

xvii 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*).