

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE VERKYKERSKOP AREA

GENERAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

The archaeological landscape of the Free State is characterised by a wide distribution of stone-walled sites. These prehistoric structures on the ridges have generated interest over the years and the dome-shaped stone huts in particular, have captured the imagination of the people.

Studies on the history and ways of living of the early inhabitants of the region have revealed detail and consistency in the arrangement and design of the structures (Maggs 1976). The expression of culture in the recognised settlement patterns has left its imprint on the environment, illustrating people's perceptions about social clustering, economic systems and political organisation. These patterns are indicated by the arrangement of huts, stock kraals and ash heaps in a particular order and in relation to one another.

Spatial organisation in general is characterised by the central position of the stock kraals and the placing of the main dwelling area on the perimeter of the settlement. From the archaeological investigation it becomes clear that during the actual occupation of these sites the emphasis was not only on stone-building, for additional structures of perishable materials supplemented living space.

Stone-walls were built in a customary manner of two faces of stacked stones with a rubble infill. All the stone structures from the prehistoric era are either circular or oval in plan. Rectangular buildings and kraals are normally either associated with missionary influences or could represent European preference during early colonial times.

The study of these stone-walls is based on the classification of settlement patterns, according to a standardised archaeological framework (Maggs 1976). This arrangement of structures and sites is characterised by connecting walls (Type V), surrounding walls (Type N) and huts with bilobial courtyards (Type Z) respectively. The clustering of sites based on settlement layout is confirmed by associated pottery assemblages with different decoration styles (Maggs 1976:290). Different settlement patterns also produced huts of different materials in different styles.

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The type site of the settlements in this region is named as Type N, after Ntsuanatsatsi (Tafelkop), a solitary hill along the R34 road between Frankfort and Vrede. Great symbolic value is attached to the name and some Sotho peoples still believe in an almost creational legend which proclaims that man (*motho*) originated from a reed bed at Ntsuanatsatsi.

Type N settlements are located in the north-eastern Free State, in the region around the towns of Warden, Frankfort, Vrede, Harrismith and Verkykerskop.

This area has always been accepted as the traditional living place of the Batlokwa and Basia peoples, (different tribes within the Sotho/Tswana cluster) before the Difaqane. Informed people have been aware of the historical significance of the region and others are becoming increasingly interested in the actual history of these ancestral sites. A memorial stone to commemorate the Batlokwa heritage and to designate the area in which at least eight generations of their chiefs were buried, was erected by the late chief Wessels Mota of Qwaqwa at the farm Morgenlicht 869 (Sunrise) in 1962. According to Mr Wally Sharratt, the landowner, people still visit the site regularly to pray and to pay homage through sacrifice.

Some of the more important sites, such as Nkwe (Sunrise) and Sefate (Verkykerskop) are known, but other Tlokwa historical sites in the region have not yet been identified. Tlokweng, where Motonosi allegedly gathered his people is indicated somewhere near the town of Vrede and the Vaal River. There is also reference to Lejwe Motho, located between Ntsuanatsatsi (Tafelkop) and Vrede, where Lebaka of the Bamogkalong (Tsoetsi) group settled for some time. This reference brings us to Leeukop (Peme), south of Ntsuanatsatsi (Maggs 1976:142), with a different settlement layout. The Malakeng, an independent Batlokwa group, was also living at Seropong, a locality which is still unknown.

Basia people were also living in this particular region, somewhat further up along the Wilge River, always in close relation with the Tlokwa. To complicate matters further, it is known that shortly before the outbreak of the Difaqane, a group of Hlubi under their chief Motsholi came from east of the Drakensberg to settle in the Tlokwa area. The localities of their settlements are still unidentified.

Archaeological excavations have been done by Maggs (1976) at the farms Helena (Ntsuanatsatsi) and Zoetbron 151, in the lower Klip River valley. The settlement pattern shows a central complex of stock pens surrounded by a ring of domed grass huts, which are in their turn enclosed by boundary walls, with ash heaps scattered on the outside. At some of the sites settlement layouts resembling sites which generally occur in the central Free State, are found. The houses associated with Type N settlements were made of reeds and grass plastered with clay and contained dung floors smeared over stone paving. The pottery of the region are characterised by finger-pinched and comb-stamped ware combined with ochre burnish. The occupation of Type N settlements is linked to the early Fokeng, Koena and Kgatla lineages. Based on radiocarbon dating and lore, Type N sites were occupied during the 15th century to early 17th century.

An investigation on the historical settlements of this area (Dreyer 1999), identified several unrecorded stone-walled living sites of two obviously different periods of occupation. These features clearly represent a Later Iron Age pastoral occupation, dating from pre-difaqane (wars of devastation 1822-1830) times. It is generally accepted that the occupants of these stone-walled sites were the ancestors of the present day Sotho peoples.

Sites containing remains of rectangular stock kraals and other buildings most likely date from a more recent period of occupation by European farmers. These structures have never been documented or investigated and differ drastically from our previous knowledge. The layout seems to indicate that different influences and priorities were important in this area during their occupation.

The origin and purpose of these structures could not be ascertained. Wall construction consisting of two faces of stacked stones with a rubble infill seems to indicate black expertise, while the rectangular form on the other hand, tends to imply European influence.

A possible explanation may be found in the size, layout and distribution of the units. It has been narrated by the old people that in bygone days, migratory stock farmers ("trekboere") from the area and from other districts such as Standerton and Volksrust further north and east across the Vaal River, used to move their cattle regularly on a seasonal basis to winter pastures in Natal and even to Swaziland. These treks were usually under the supervision of young European boys assisted by black herders. According to lore this movement of stock took place from long before the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and continued until the 1930s and 1940s.

Bearing this in mind, it can be concluded that these kraal sites could have been an aspect of a system of stock migration during colonial times.