

Later Stone Age socio-economic variability in the Northern Cape, South Africa

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Until approximately 2000 years ago, people in the more arid, western half of southern Africa primarily led a forager existence. Then the socio-economic landscape changed quite dramatically with the emergence of early herding practices among stone tool-using groups. Exactly how this socio-economic variability came about is still being debated, but it is generally thought that either a migration of foreign herders, or the adoption of domestic stock by local hunter-gatherers, led to the spread of herding throughout the region.

I present some preliminary results of a project that continued the investigation into the distinction between prehistoric hunting and herding activities in the Northern Cape and set its findings within the wider southern African context. The project built upon suggestions in the literature that socio-economic variability is represented by two distinct, yet contemporary local artefact industries, generally known as the Swartkop and the Doornfontein (Beaumont *et al.* 1995). The former has been attributed to hunter-gatherers, and the latter to herding groups. Basic questions asked during this research included:

- What are the characteristics of artefact assemblages provisionally ascribed to the Swartkop and Doornfontein, and do these comply with the proposed attributes of these industries?
- Is there a clear distinction between two sets of material culture in the research area during the last 2000 year?
- Does such a distinction necessarily imply divergent socio-economies?

In an effort to address these questions, five assemblages from the southern Kalahari / Upper Karoo regions were considered. Four of these – Jagt Pan 7, Melkboom 1, Bokvasmaak 3 and Biesje Poort 2 (Excavation I) – were existing assemblages, excavated by Peter Beaumont on open-air sites during the 1980s/90s and now housed in the McGregor Museum, Kimberley. I excavated the fifth assemblage at Vlermuisgat to obtain a comparative sample from a stratified cave site.

Various analytical tools were used to establish the features of the assemblages and to enable a comparison with the suggested distinctive characteristics of artefacts made by hunter-gatherers and herding groups. Lithic artefacts were subjected to typological, metric, and macro-fracture analyses. The latter, conducted by Marlize Lombard, identifies fractures that are diagnostic of impact-use, such as hunting, and was considered potentially useful in terms of establishing why large numbers of lithic blades and bladelets are included in so-called Swartkop assemblages. In addition, all ostrich eggshell beads were measured, pottery fragments described, and faunal components analysed – the latter by Elizabeth A. Voigt. Additional or new radiocarbon dates were also obtained for most of the sites.

The results of the analyses indicated that two of the assemblages – Jagt Pan 7 and Vlermuisgat – resemble the tool kits, as described in the literature, of Swartkop hunter-gatherers. The remaining three appear to have more in common with assemblages currently ascribed to the Doornfontein Industry. However, a large degree of overlap exists between the characteristics of these sets of assemblages. This overlap, combined with the results of the faunal analyses, suggests a more complicated picture than that previously proposed. Nevertheless, the possibility that the Swartkop and Doornfontein Industries are representative of diverse socio-economies cannot, on current evidence, be eliminated.

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Reference

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