A Moment in the Past of Thaba ya Batswana

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For Reuben Louw
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A MOMENT IN THE PAST OF THABA YA BATSWANA

-Revil Mason

INTRODUCTION

Mrs. E. Simonis, who initiated the dig, introduced me to Mr Reuben Louw whose development road on Thaba ya Batswana cross a low mound exposing pottery and bone fragments. I was invited to investigate. The South African Heritage Resources Agency gave me authority to do a rescue excavation followed by a permit regulating the work including curation of excavated materials.

I conducted the rescue excavation on 26-27 February with the intensive assistance of Mrs. Simonis and the help of assistants provided by Mr Wilkin. Preparation of materials, photography, drawing and writing took 5 days in March. The Africa Museum in Gauteng certified the SAHRA permit and received the labeled materials for curation.

THE EXCAVATION

The Thaba ya Batswana site is one of over 100 Iron Age stone-walled sites I have identified on the Klipriviersberg, a Venterdorp Diabase dig south of the Johannesburg CBD. The excavation site is a few meters up slope of a heavily-bushed Iron Age stone-walled site, part of a cluster of Iron Age sites on the Thaba ya Batswana koppie. The excavation site is identified as Thaba ya Batswana Site 1. Site 1 is about 100 m NNW of Beacon 312 at 1695.2 m (FIG 2 from 1:50,000 sheet 2628 AC Alberton.) The area today is grassland and olive-acacia karree bush, but during the Iron Age was probably grassland.

Site 1 is a low mound about 10 m in diameter rising about 15 cm above ground level. The mound is pale grey in contrast to dark red ground level. Site 1 probably represents debris from occupation of the downslope Iron Age site. The visitor may envisage women from the site sweeping ash from their fireplaces and yards, including food and artefact debris and dumping it out of their way on Site 1.

Artefacts and food waste reflect the culture of the makers. As we shall see, there is a close similarity between Site 1 materials and those from Meyer’s Farm Sites 5/65 and 18/69 dated in the 1700’s and probably related to the BaHurutse group of the Batswana people (FIG 1, 2.)

In addition to the Iron Age materials there are a few Late Stone Age artefacts from the red soil under the grey ash. These are similar to circa AD 600 - 1100 artefacts from Witwatersrand and Magaliesberg cave sites.
So site 1 gives two flashes into the unknown past of Thaba ya Batswana, one onto the last San Stone Age hunters of Gauteng and one onto the first builders and farmers.

**WIDE RANGE OF DATA FROM SITE 1**

Site 1 was only 1 x 10 x 20 - 30 m in dimension but it produced a wide range of archaeological objects, sufficient to infer the following activities:

- Farming (cattle, sheep/goats)
- Cultivating (sorghum?)
- Making good pottery
- Plastering houses
- Making ostrich and probably mussel shell and talc beads
- Preparing leather from raw skins
- Snaring game birds
- Presence of Late Stone Age hunters

**EXCAVATION METHOD**

Ms Simonis and I set out a 1 x 10m grid lane about 50 m SW of the new Conference Center, placed sieve sets on trestles, and started removing the A1-I0 deposit Grid square by grid square in 20 cm cuts. Deposit was carried to the sieves in buckets, passed through the sieves and archaeological material placed in labeled plastic bags. Each 1 x 1 m square was excavated to natural soil before proceeding to the next square.

The materials found table shows that the archaeological Yield of each square was similar. The materials suggest that life within the materials generating settlement was uniform during the period represented by A1 - 10/- - 30. Thickness of deposit increased from 20 to 30 cm, resting on red natural soil changing to rocky red soil in A7- 10.

The rocky soil also showed earlier artifacts. A few Late Stone Age tools prove the passage of hunters earlier than the pottery of the farmers in A1 -I0/0-30.
Fig 1

Thaba ya Batswana in the Network of the Past
AD 350-1800
There are at least 190 Iron Age settlements between Meyer’s Farm west of Alberton and Soweto. The biggest settlements are on Meyer’s Farm. Small clusters of settlements extend west of this big concentration. The Thaba ya Batswana cluster is one of the smaller clusters.
Description of materials (see table page 6)

POTTERY

The 293 potshreds and 21 rim shreds in the A1-10 trench represent a higher proportion of pot fragments to deposit processed than any other site excavated in the Klipriviersberg. The rim shreds represent a uniform range of wide-mouthed jars except for two small bowls. The larger jars have rim diameters smaller than maximum diameters suggesting non-spill capacity if tipped accidentally. The small bowls were made to admit fingers reaching for salt or relish.

Maximum diameters are 30 - 8 cm.

These vessels were made by adults, but an additional 5 shreds were irregular in shape. They represent vessels about 4 cm in diameter. These suggest the 'prentice hand', young girls copying their mothers' potmaking. One of these 'prentice pots' has an angular 'pricked' motif similar to adult motifs from Meyer's Farm Sites 5/65 and 18/69 a few kilometers to the east of Thaba ya Batswana.

Only one of the A1-10 'adult' vessels is decorated. This is a small fragment of a rim with a graphite burnished band above a diagonal stamp motif. Similar decoration is common at Meyer's Farm.

Comparisons with pottery from other sites North of the Vaal River, South of the Waterberg.

The Thaba ya Batswana pottery assemblage is small but it probably is a small part of a pottery tradition represented at sites between Midrand and Zeerust. At least two other pottery traditions are recorded in this area, one at Olifantspoort and one at Platberg near Klerksdorp. The Midrand-Zeerust tradition is associated with the Bahurutse Group, the Olifantspoort with the Kwenya and Platberg with the Rolong.

Full discussion of these possible relationships is set out in my book (Mason 1986.)
Thaba ya Batswana Site 1  
A/0-IO/0-30  
Date 25-26/2102

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artefact</th>
<th>Grid</th>
<th>A0-1</th>
<th>A1-2</th>
<th>A2-3</th>
<th>A3-4</th>
<th>A4-5</th>
<th>A5-6</th>
<th>A6-7</th>
<th>A7-8</th>
<th>A8-9</th>
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<td>27</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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<td>1C</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>4C</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2C1SG</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hut Plaster</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition: Burned Porridge in all squares, 1 piece Ostrich Eggshell (A6-7/0-30)  
2 Freshwater Mussel Shell (A6-7/0-30l, 3 Late Stone Age Artefacts (A7-8/30l, 1 piece Talc (beadmaking?)  
OE=Ostrich Eggshell, C=Cattle, SG=Sheep/Goat. Little G.Pots are pieces of miniature  
pots that may have been made by young girls imitating their mothers' potmaking.
Fig 3

The Site 1 ash mound is between the gridlines, shown at the start of the excavation, seen here with Mr. and Mrs. Simonis, workers and Sieves.
Fig 4

The excavation nearly completed.

Maximum depth of deposit. Background bush has grown in stone boundary walls of the settlement that produced the excavated deposit.
End of the excavation. This Late Stone Age artifact was one of several found in the natural rocky soil of Squares 7-10/30. The artifact is a ‘scraper’ 13 mm in length. The trimmed ‘scraper’ edge (top left corner) is only 4 mm in length.
Fig 8

Graphite Burnish
Red Matt
Comb impression

Thaba ya Batswana
25-26/02

1=A 0-1/0-20
2=A 2-3/0-20
3=A 1-2/0-20
4=A 0-1/0-20
5=A2-3/0-20
6=A1-2/0-20
7=A9-10/0-30
Bone skin scrapers (see figs 9, 10)

28 rib or rib-like bone fragments about 1.5 cm wide and up to 10 cm in length have ground surfaces across the width of the bone suggesting use in skin preparation by scraping surface fibre off skin surfaces to make clothing, bags or other artifacts.

One of the skin scrapers is pointed.

Skin scrapers are common Iron Age artifacts and were first recorded by me at Olifantspoort 20/71 (Mason 1986).

They indicate an economy deprived of woven fibre for clothing, Ostrich eggshell beads and bone beads (see figs 11, 12).

The Thaba ya Batswana people were forced to make their own decoration artifacts using ostrich and mussel shell and bone. They had no trading network to provide East Coast glass beads of Indian or Arabic origin which reached Iron Age peoples from Mapungubwe northwards. Isolated cowry or conus shells were found by myself in Midrand and elsewhere but never in trading quantities.

Klipriviersberg Iron Age trade was limited to iron and copper carried in from the Melville-Bruma-Ufafi-Uitkomst iron and copper smelting furnace workers (Mason 1987). Meyer's Farm 5/65 and 18/69 people had iron and copper finger rings, wrist bangles and neck rings as well as iron beads probably from the Witwatersrand-Skurweberg-Daspoort smelters.

A piece of talc from Thaba ya Batswana (fig12) was probably intended to make cylindrical beads like those found at Mapoch's Grond (Mason 1962). The talc was found in local Ventersdorp Diabase while ostriches and freshwater mussels were locally collected.
Fig 9

Scraper edge>

Thaba ya Batswana A1-10
Bone Skin Scrapers w.10-23 mm
Fig 10

Scraper edge

Thaba ya Batswana A1-10
Bone Skin Scrapers w.10-23 mm
Cattle, sheep/goat and bird bone fragments and teeth (fig 13)

Teeth in A1-I0 are limited to cattle and sheep or goats. 10 teeth were found, representing two cattle and one sheep or goat. All were well matured animals probably used for milk for years then slaughtered.

Wild animals were limited to a bird, probably a francolin caught in a trap. 8 bone fragments were found. 153 bone fragments, long bones smashed to pieces less than 15 cm in length, show intensive use of tissues on bones for food.

Bones were scraped clean of all tissues which were boiled or eaten raw. The bones were then broken and interior tissues sucked out.

Possible burned porridge fragments (fig 14)

About 300 grammes of possible burned porridge lumps were found. The lumps have a soft uniform black consistency, suggesting overcooked sorghum or millet porridge. Actual grains of sorghum were found in the Meyer's Farm 5/65 excavation. (Mason 1986)

Hut Plaster (fig 14)

Two pieces of baked hut plaster were found, suggesting that a mud plastered hut inside the stone-walled settlement had burned down.

A few Late Stone Age stone artifacts came out of the rocky red soil at the A6-10 end of the excavation. These could be 500 – 1000 years older than the Iron Age artifacts. The single complete artifact is a trimmed quartz flake 13mm in length. 4mm of one edge was trimmed. I have excavated identical artifacts at sites such as Olieboompoort Cave, Oppermansdrif Kruger and Cedarbergkloof Caves (Mason 1987). These Late Stone Age sites are C14 dated to circa AD800-1100. Similar artifacts were excavated at sites near Klipriviersberg, Glenfarness Cave and Melville Cave. Small stone tools such as these may have been used for shaping wooden arrowshafts.
Fig 11

Bead making at Thaba ya Batswana

Ostrich and Mussel shell for beads

Half-completed bead
note off-centre drill hole

Completed ostrich bead
Fig 12

Cylindrical bone bead

Talc for beads

Bead making at Thaba ya Batswana
Fig 13

Cattle bones smashed, sucked, scraped, boiled

See table for Grid references

Archeological links to Diet
Fig 14

Francolin leg bone snapped, sucked and scraped

See table for Grid references

Burned millet porridge

Baked hut plaster (over 500°C)

Archeological links to Diet and Building
Summary of Thaba ya Batswana investigation March 2002

Thaba ya Batswana Site 1 gives us two flashes into the darkness of the kop's past. First, we now know that the last Stone Age hunters of the Witwatersrand walked past the place, now occupied by the Conference Centre. They were probably related to the last prehistoric artists who left their paintings on the walls of Kruger Cave in the Magaliesberg. Their last traces were as 'healers' who bolstered the power of the Kwena chief in the huge village at Olifantspoort Site 20171 near the Magaliesberg Contemporary with van Riebeeck's settlement on the slopes of Table Mountain.

Thaba ya Batswana Site 1 people were part of an enormous Development in the South African interior. Their ancestors' roots go back to the people of Broederstroom Site 24/71 in the Magaliesberg Valley. Broederstroom is dated to AD 300-600 and represents the local origin of a cluster of Batswana ancestral traditions related to the Hurutse-Kgatla, Rolong and Kwena builders of farming and metal-producing settlements at present known between Gauteng and Zeerust.

Close similarity between the archaeology of Thaba ya Batswana and Meyer's Farm settlements extends westward to the Zeerust Site 13/66 which is probably ancestral to the AD1815 Hurutse settlement visited by the LMS missionary John Campbell. Campbell and other travelers are the source of models I have used to connect these sites to the Batswana People (Mason 1986).

Only about 2% of the Klipriviersberg sites have been investigated. A rich story awaits the Klipriviersberg investigator.
References
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