

ASSESSING OUDEPOST 1: A RESPONSE TO YATES AND SMITH*

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A most gratifying number of debates has arisen from the research programme based on the excavations at Oudepost 1, Cape. They include concerns of historiography (Penn 1991), site identity (Hromnik 1990), site age (Yates & Smith 1993a) and the archaeological signature of indigenous people at the Cape (Smith *et al.* 1991). It has been a privilege to respond hitherto (Schrire 1991, 1992a & b) and I thank the present editors for this opportunity to comment, albeit briefly, on the most recent defence of their position by Yates and Smith (1993b).

The present paper (Yates & Smith 1993b) needs to be read in conjunction with their recent critique of the pipestem dating of Oudepost 1 (Yates & Smith 1993a). Both papers insist that certain of the indigenous artefacts from Oudepost 1 (Schrire & Deacon 1989) could not have been made, used, or dropped, by the kind of indigenous people whose presence at Oudepost 1 is attested in the documentary record. Both papers raise interesting issues, but they misunderstand the nature of archival sources and the formulation of archaeological inference and the pipestem critique is rife with factual errors.

The pipestem paper (Yates & Smith 1993a) purports to show that most of the deposit at Oudepost 1 accumulated in the 18th century, some 30 years after the post was established, so that peoples unknown and unmentioned in the archival record might well have been the authors of the troublesome silcrete artefacts found there. It fails to make its case mainly because it compares incomparable sets of data, some of which are wrong. Its first error is to compare the mean size of pipestem bore diameters as guides to the ages of different sites. Leaving aside the well attested variance in stem bores of pipes from the same box, site means can only reflect the true mean date there if there were a constant deposition of fragments throughout the occupation of the site. This was patently not the case at Oudepost (Schrire *et al.* 1990) and certainly not the case at the slave lodge at Vergelegen, where almost every trace of occupation was systematically removed before we got there (Markell 1993; Markell *et al.* n.d.).

Secondly, the authors might generously be seen as trying to redress this matter by comparing the Oudepost

means with that of samples from shipwrecks. Unfortunately the wreck samples were not measured with the customary drill bits but with an electronic caliper. Yates and Smith try to redress the ensuing disparities by subtracting an arbitrary 0.2 mm from the caliper means. They attribute this tactic to Dr A. Markell (Yates & Smith 1993a:52, Footnote 1), but Markell who is well versed in the unreliability of caliper figures has been sadly misrepresented here (A. Markell, pers. comm.).

Thirdly, the samples that they use are incomparable with those at Oudepost because, while the means of numerous groups of pipestems at Oudepost were computed after correcting for uneven intervals of measurement (Schrire *et al.* 1990:278), the means of all of the other samples used by Smith and Yates were not. Finally, Yates and Smith try to refute the Oudepost data by ascribing calendar dates to the erroneous shipwreck samples, according to a curve that was disclaimed in later years by the author himself! (McCashion & Robinson 1977:63; McCashion 1990, pers. comm.; See Schrire *et al.* 1990:293). The net effect speaks for itself.

Harsh though my comments may appear to be, they are nevertheless intended to be instructive. Yates and Smith have flown into an unfamiliar field only to rise like magpies with odd and faulty data in their beaks. Dr. Markell is sorely misrepresented and the students, whose data they have used, end up looking less competent than they undoubtedly must be. The hasty footnotes that include one reference to an unlisted paper (Yates & Smith 1993a: Footnote 3) betray an uncharacteristic rush to press by the normally judicious editor.

The present re-entry to the fray (Yates & Smith 1993b) includes a correction of my misreading of Drie Susters as a "herder" site, an innovative and self-fulfilling index of ceramic frequency that depends on the incidence of stone tools in a site and the restatement of my observation that water sieving at Oudepost probably forced small beads through the holes (Schrire 1990:271). Its main flaw resides in their claim that they are dealing with *evidence* that "archaeologically distinguishable cultural and economic entities persisted up to the colonial period" (Yates & Smith 1993b:96). We are, in fact, dealing with data that has been *interpreted* as showing that the presence of culturally different groups were

present over time. The interpretation may be tested and it may hold up or not as the case may be, but it cannot be proven by invention of events.

Thus their reiterated opinion that the large beads at Voëlvelei represent one-way penetration of herder culture into a hunter culture whose beads the herders didn't like, is untestable. It may be true, it may be false, but it fails to advance archaeological theory or interpretation because it cannot be tested.

Similarly, their interpretation that the 12 silcrete artefacts at Oudepost 1 signal the presence of hunters who occupied the post during a lull in documentary exchange, may or may not be true. Yates and Smith imagine that this proposition may be tested against the archival record. They berate me for failing to specify the *exact* nature of colonial-indigenous interactions regarding shared domestic space and demand to *know* whether small or large groups of indigenous people visited the site. Their demands betray a singular lack of familiarity with written sources which is not surprising since one of them, at least, has never set foot in the State Archives (R. Yates, pers. comm.).

The avowed aim of Yates and Smith to define the archaeological signature of distinct cultural groups may or may not be fulfilled. But if they are to make a significant inroad to this matter, they will have to leave fiction to others (Schrire 1994) and follow the tried and tested Popperian path of hypothetico-deductive reasoning.

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