Southern African Field Archaeology 3:55-58. 1994.

NOTES

AN OSTRICH EGGSHELL CACHE FROM THE VAALBOS NATIONAL PARK, NORTHERN CAPE*

DAVID MORRIS

McGregor Museum, P.O. Box 316,
Kimberley, 8300

INTRODUCTION

The practice by Khoisan of burying or otherwise setting aside caches of ostrich eggshell containers, with or without contents, has been documented both ethnographically (Schapera 1930; Dunn 1931; Duggan-Cronin & Bleek 1942: fig. 22; Yellen 1977; Lee 1979) and archaeologically (Rudner 1953; Sandelowsky 1971; Humphreys 1974; McGregor Museum Collection). However the latter instances are known all too often through fortuitous *post factum* reports by farmers after turning up such finds in the course of agricultural activities (Humphreys 1974). In these cases one can never be quite certain of the context, and often the remains are somewhat damaged. A cache of ostrich eggshell containers was recently found during construction of a new tour route through the Vaalbos National Park at Sydney-on-Vaal (Fig. 1). Park officials had the foresight to leave their find until an archaeologist could investigate it, leading to its excavation and description in this short note.

THE CACHE

The discovery was made by Mr Willie Saulse, when he spotted two eggs in the entrance to a deserted antbear hole utilized by warthogs, just off the new road. Another three were exposed in the side of the hole, about a metre below the surface. Mr Craig Bancroft, Park Warden, contacted the McGregor Museum, and the excavation, conducted during the following weekend, revealed a total of fifteen ostrich eggshell containers, which had been packed tightly together in the soft Kalahari sand. One was cracked and pieces from the top end of it were displaced by biotubation, but the remainder were fully intact and probably retained the positions in which they were originally placed (Fig. 2).

The site is situated in a patch of Kalahari sandveld, bounded to the north east and west by a large bend in the Vaal River, a little under 2 km distant at its closest point. No other artefacts were detected in the excavation or in the immediate vicinity of the cache, but the presence of material covered over by sand cannot be ruled out. A Later Stone Age Khoisan context is inferred, however, on the basis of historical and ethnographic

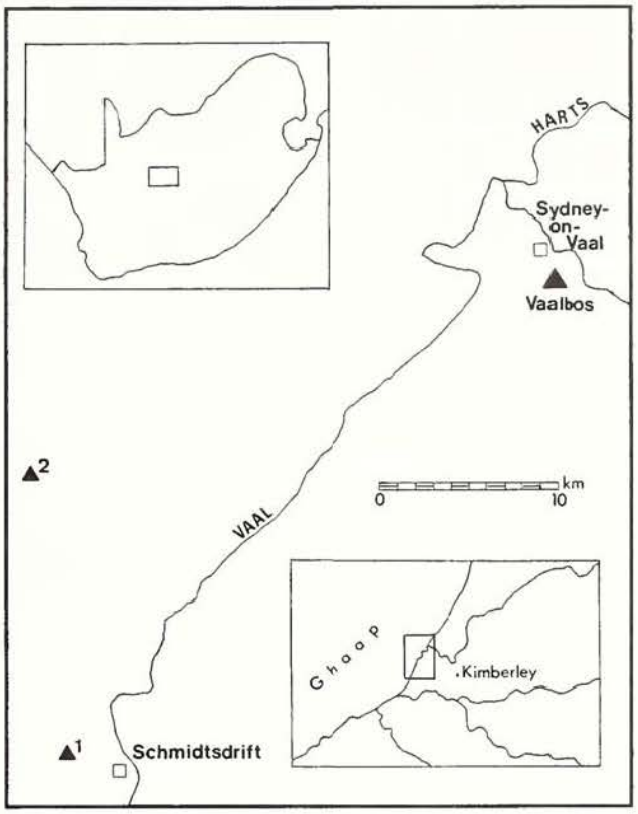

Fig. 1. Map showing the position of the Vaalbos site near Sydney-on-Vaal. The point marked '1' is the approximate location of an abandoned 'Bushman' encampment described by Burchell in 1811 and mentioned in the text. '2' is the position of two shelters at Limerock, Ghaap Escarpment (Humphreys & Thackeray 1983), which yielded abundant ostrich eggshell mouth fragments and decorated pieces.

observations. Engelbrecht (1936) does not mention the use of ostrich eggshell containers among the Korana in the Northern Cape, who made a variety of wooden and ceramic vessels (*cf.* Smith 1985): but ostrich eggshell remains do occur on what are believed to be both hunter-gatherer and pastoralist sites in this region (*cf.* Rudner 1971), and it is conceivable that eggshells may have served certain categories of herder containerisation in the past. Burchell (1822-4) described an abandoned 'Bushman' encampment in what appears to have been a rather similar setting to this Vaalbos site, in a thicket of

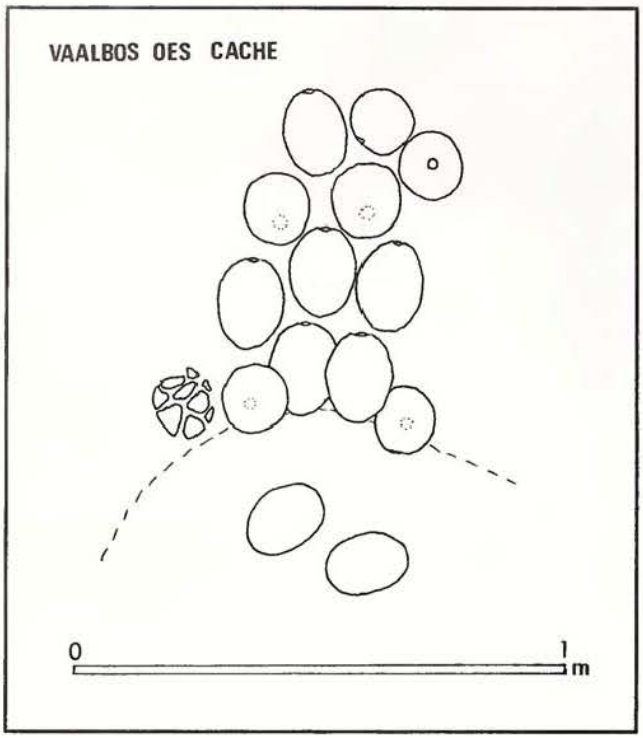

Fig. 2. A plan of the cache with the dashed line indicating the edge of the exposure. Only one of the eggshells found *in situ* had an upward-facing mouth. The remainder either pointed downwards or were positioned on their sides. The latter all face south, but whether there is any significance in this is unknown.

large Acacias near Schmidtsdrift, about 40 km to the south, in 1811 (Humphreys 1975).

On examination, very small traces of specularite were noted on the outsides of all the eggs, but none contained this substance (*cf.* Humphreys 1974). This may be taken as an indication that the people who used and/or buried the eggs possessed specularite, which was used on the body for cosmetic and ritual purposes (*e.g.* Bleek 1911). Fourteen of the eggs had mouths ground into the tapered end, while one had a hole in its side. Mouth diameters averaged 15 mm with a range between 13,0 and 17,1 mm. Several had been placed on their sides, and four with their openings facing downwards, yet all were very nearly (average 95%) full of sand. Rudner (1953), who describes an ostrich eggshell cache excavated north of Upington, found all but one of the seven shells there to be full of sand. The empty egg had its mouth facing downwards, and she concluded that the sand, in that instance, had trickled into the eggs after burial. However, it is difficult to account for the Vaalbos case except by suggesting that they were so filled prior to burial. No trace of any plug, or resin or beeswax around the mouths of the eggs (*cf.* Dunn 1931; Rudner 1953), was noted. Interestingly, along with the sand, small quantities of charred grass and burnt twigs (less than 1 g) were found inside the eggs. A most likely scenario is that the eggs were buried here for storage purposes for a projected return to the site. Perhaps they were filled with sand for strength in case of animals walking overhead; and in the process charred material blown from a nearby hearth came to be included. A close ethnographic parallel for this is described by Yellen, observing behaviour at a succession of encampments in the !Kangwa region of Botswana, at one of which several items, including containers, were cached for a future return (Yellen 1977:152).

The condition of the eggshells suggests that they may not be more than a few centuries old, while in terms of local history they are unlikely to date back less than about 150 years.

DISCUSSION

In the ethnography, ostrich eggshells feature principally as water containers used by hunter gatherer groups (Moffat 1842; Stow 1905; Bleek 1911; Dornan 1925; Schapera 1930). Silberbauer (1981) notes that /Gwi encampments were seldom less than 1 km from any given water source, and eggshells were used to bring water to the camp (*cf.* Duggan-Cronin & Bleek 1942: figs 1, 2). They were also used by women when out gathering, but were too heavy and cumbersome to be taken on the hunt. Marshall (1976) and Lee (1979) noted among the !Kung that married women kept some five to ten eggs on behalf of each family or household. Animal skins or bladders were also fashioned into water containers, and these were favoured by some groups on longer journeys (Silberbauer 1981:221). Lee cites a personal communication from Campbell that on occasion /Gwi buried several hundred eggs filled with water at a single locality in the rainy season for later dry season use (1979:123; *cf.* Schapera 1930:143). Dunn (1931:35) records from his Upper Karoo travels in the 1870s that, while on the move in that arid region, a Bushman would bury an eggshell water container at intervals of "about 20 miles...near some mark that he alone would recognise". In this way a supply would be ensured for his return. But eggs also served other purposes: for holding 'Bushman rice' (Bleek 1911:261); for food (Silberbauer 1981:216); for carrying and storing ostrich eggshell fragments for bead and pendant manufacture (Sandelowsky 1971); and for transporting and keeping supplies of specularite and ochre (Sandelowsky 1971; Humphreys 1974). One eggshell containing specularite was amongst grave goods recovered from a burial near Upington (Rudner 1971), indicating a ritual dimension to their use.

Eggs occur in clutches of 10-15 in ostrich nests (Lee 1979). Among the /Gwi, not more than two or three eggs were gathered per nest (Silberbauer 1981:216). The contents were a great delicacy, though Marshall has recorded an avoidance associated with them in that men and women from the age of puberty until they were old enough to have had five children were not to partake of them (Marshall 1976:127; Biesele 1993:107). Dorothea Bleek noted among the Naron that they were given chiefly to old men to eat (1928:7). Supernatural potency ascribed to them (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989) relates to concepts of 'luck' or 'suitedness' among the Ju/'hoan (Biesele 1993). They believe that if a person who is 'lucky' with ostrich eggs eats them, rain will fall;

but that, conversely, it will not rain if they are eaten by one for whom they are 'unlucky' or 'ill-suited' (*op. cit.* 107). Biesele further records a prohibition against tossing ostrich eggs, a taboo which applies to some other foods and objects as well.

Turning the eggshells into water containers was observed by Lee (1979:276) to take about an hour, and these would last some two years. Such flasks were sometimes decorated (Dunn 1931). In rare examples of egg engraving among the !Kung, the designs signified ownership, according to Marshall (1976:77), but Lee (1979:122) has denied this as the reason for decoration. Unlike the cache excavated by Rudner (1953), none of the Vaalbos eggs bears any sign of such markings. But a wide range of engraved motifs is known from egg fragments from archaeological sites not far from Vaalbos (Humphreys & Thackeray 1983; fig. 1).

It would indeed be interesting to determine more closely the motivations and meanings behind decorating eggs, given the avoidances and potency noted, and the use of the shells for carrying water; and given the social and religious significance of water over and above its very material centrality in the lives of people in this dry region (Hoernlé 1923; Lewis-Williams 1981; Humphreys 1993). Both figurative and, much more commonly, non-figurative designs occur (*e.g.* Rudner 1953; Rudner 1971; Humphreys & Thackeray 1983). Ostrich eggs do seem also to feature in rock engravings, as 'dots' in association with ostriches at Schoolplaats and Disselfontein (Fock & Fock 1989), and it is feasible that the several dot-cluster engravings at the latter site (Morris & Fourshé 1993), while they might be construed as entoptics or indeed be a conflation of entoptic and iconic forms (Dowson 1989), could well be further examples.

CONCLUSION

There remain questions for which the Vaalbos cache provides no answers. Apart from those raised in the above discussion, there is no way of telling more closely the identity of its owners, what became of them, or what it was that led to this particular cache being lost or abandoned in the sand. But the find is an interesting example from a category of archaeological sites that all too often have been destroyed before there has been a chance to describe them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Craig Bancroft of the National Parks Board for drawing the museum's attention to this site and for giving up a Saturday afternoon to help in its excavation. I thank my family who also helped. Sephai Mngqolo assisted in the examination of the eggs; and Fiona Barbour brought my attention to some useful references.

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Southern African Field Archaeology 3:58-60. 1994.

A UNIQUE STONE TIPPED ARROWHEAD FROM ADAM'S KRANZ CAVE, EASTERN CAPE

JOHAN BINNEMAN

Albany Museum, Somerset Street,
Grahamstown, 6140

Of particular interest to archaeologists is the design and material used for the foreshaft and arrowhead. Apart from linkshafts, only a few fragmented pieces of this type of equipment have been reported from archaeological contexts. The presence of mastic on microlithic backed stone tools from several archaeological sites have given rise to speculation that these stone tools were used as projectiles for hunting equipment (Clark *et al.* 1974; Deacon 1976; Parkington 1980). Portions of arrows have been found at Big Elephant Shelter (Clark & Walton 1962; Wadley 1979) Pomonwe Cave (Cooke 1975), Melkhoutboom Cave (Deacon, H.J. 1976), De Hangen (Parkington & Poggenpoel 1971), Collingham Shelter Mazel (1992) and fine examples of two bone points with mastic mounts still in place have been reported from Faraoskop Rock Shelter in the western Cape (Manhire 1993). Stone tanged and barbed 'arrowheads' have been reported from open sites (Wilson 1955; Humphreys 1969; Dreyer 1975).

Several early travellers and writers reported that stone and when obtainable also glass was used as arrowheads (see Rudner 1979). For example, Wikar, a Swedish runaway soldier who lived among the Khoisan groups along the Orange River between 1775 and 1779 reported that arrowheads were usually iron-barbed, but that they also used sharp-edged white stone. Arrowheads were also made of sharpened bones of gemsbuck (Mossop 1935). Dale (1870) described an arrow collected by a certain W.C. Palgrave from the Orange River area as being fitted with a small leaf-shaped flake made of quartz crystal with sharp edges and point and set in a "fine cement". Dunn (1873) reported that an old Bushman in Bushmanland showed him how arrowheads were made. Two equal sized stone flakes were semented together so that the sharp ends coincided to form a piercing end. This description by Dunn agrees with the arrows made during 1878 for Dr W. Bleek by Jantje, a Bushman prisoner, using backed glass flakes. These arrows are housed in the University of Cape Town's ethnographic collection (Goodwin 1945) and at the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford (Clark 1977).

Despite these reports not a single example of arrowheads fitted with stone is to be found anywhere. From Schapera's (1927) report on the different types of arrows found historically among Bushmen groups of southern Africa, it would appear that bone and iron were the only materials used for arrowheads. This observation is confirmed by the survey done by J. Deacon (1984) who determined that all arrows in museum collections in Namibia and Botswana which pre-date 1920 are made of bone or beaten fencing wire and those in South Africa which pre-date 1920 are made of bone (Deacon J. 1984).

STONE TIPPED ARROWHEAD FROM ADAM'S KRANZ CAVE

Adam's Kranz Cave is situated some 60 km north of Grahamstown in the eastern Cape Midlands (Fig. 1). The cave is located in steep cliffs some 200 m above the Great Fish River in the Double Drift Nature Reserve in the Ciskei. The surface units at Adams Kranz Cave consist of large patches of well-preserved plant material and during the excavation of these an almost complete arrow foreshaft was found. The very tip was broken off but a large piece of mastic was still attached to it. The end bit, a small chert stone flake set in mastic, was later recovered when material from the same floor was sorted. It fitted exactly the broken end of the foreshaft. A