

RIET RIVER REVISITED: COMMENTS ON RECENT FINDINGS AT PRAMBERG*

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ABSTRACT

Recently published archaeological research along the Riet River is discussed and alternative interpretations offered which hint at the possibility of providing a more accurate or realistic reflection of events along the Riet during the early historical period. These, in turn, have implications for the earlier Type R settlement period.

INTRODUCTION

The stone walled settlements located along the Riet River roughly between its confluence with the Vaal in the west and the Kalkfontein Dam in the east (Fig 1.) were first dubbed "Type R settlements" by Maggs (1967) during his seminal study of the distribution of Iron Age sites in the Orange Free State using aerial photographs. Maggs's (1971) work and subsequent research by myself (Humphreys 1972) led to the general interpretation of the settlements as having been occupied by former hunter-gatherers who, through contact with mixed farming communities to the north, had developed their own form of pastoralist existence. A suite of dates from various sources (burials and settlements) suggests that the 'flowering' of the lifestyle represented by the Type R settlements ranged from about AD 1380 to 1780. This interpretation has been perpetuated in all later research and references to the Riet River settlements (*e.g.* Humphreys 1988; Morris 1992; and others referred to below).

Recent observations reported in this journal, most notably in the Pramberg area (Brink *et al.* 1992; Dreyer 1996), have, it may be suggested, opened the door to a more detailed understanding of the social dynamics that were in place during the early historical period - a period during which the Type R settlements appear to have been abandoned. These recent observations at Pramberg, moreover, caution that the 'local hunter-gatherer turned pastoralist' model developed to explain the Type R settlements might be an oversimplification of the position along the Riet River even at that time. The historical picture is far more complex and it can consequently be expected that the archaeology - and its interpretation - should reflect this complexity. The purpose of this contribution is to revisit the Riet River, more specifically the Pramberg area, 25 years after my own research and

point out some possibilities for more sophisticated insights in our reconstruction of early activity along the river - both before and after the Difaqane - by offering alternative interpretations of the evidence presented by Brink *et al.* (1992) and Dreyer (1996). First, however, it is necessary to examine the historical context along the Riet River.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is a set of historical observations that relates directly to the Pramberg area and these can be used to gain some idea of the range of remains - for that slice of time, at least - that can be expected potentially to be preserved in the archaeological record.

Andrew Smith (1939) travelled along the Riet River through the entire area in which Type R settlements occur during the period 30 December 1834 to 6 January 1835 (Fig 1.). He made a series of valuable observations of the post-Difaqane period which have been analysed in detail elsewhere (Humphreys 1972:66-73). Only a few points will be highlighted here. What is of particular note is the fact that he does not appear to have recorded any signs of activity which could be associated with the Type R settlements. As already pointed out, this has led to the assumption that they had ceased to be occupied by the time of Smith's journey. Of most relevance for present purposes, however, is his account of other activity in the Pramberg area. While it is not possible to pin-point his observations with complete accuracy, the people and settlements he encountered can be located with some degree of confidence. On 1 January he left Blauwe Bank at sunrise. The geological formations which gave rise to this name are clearly visible today so this can be accepted as a fixed point. After 3 hours he encountered a group of Bushwomen (no men) whom he described in great detail. These women (who had crossed the river for the

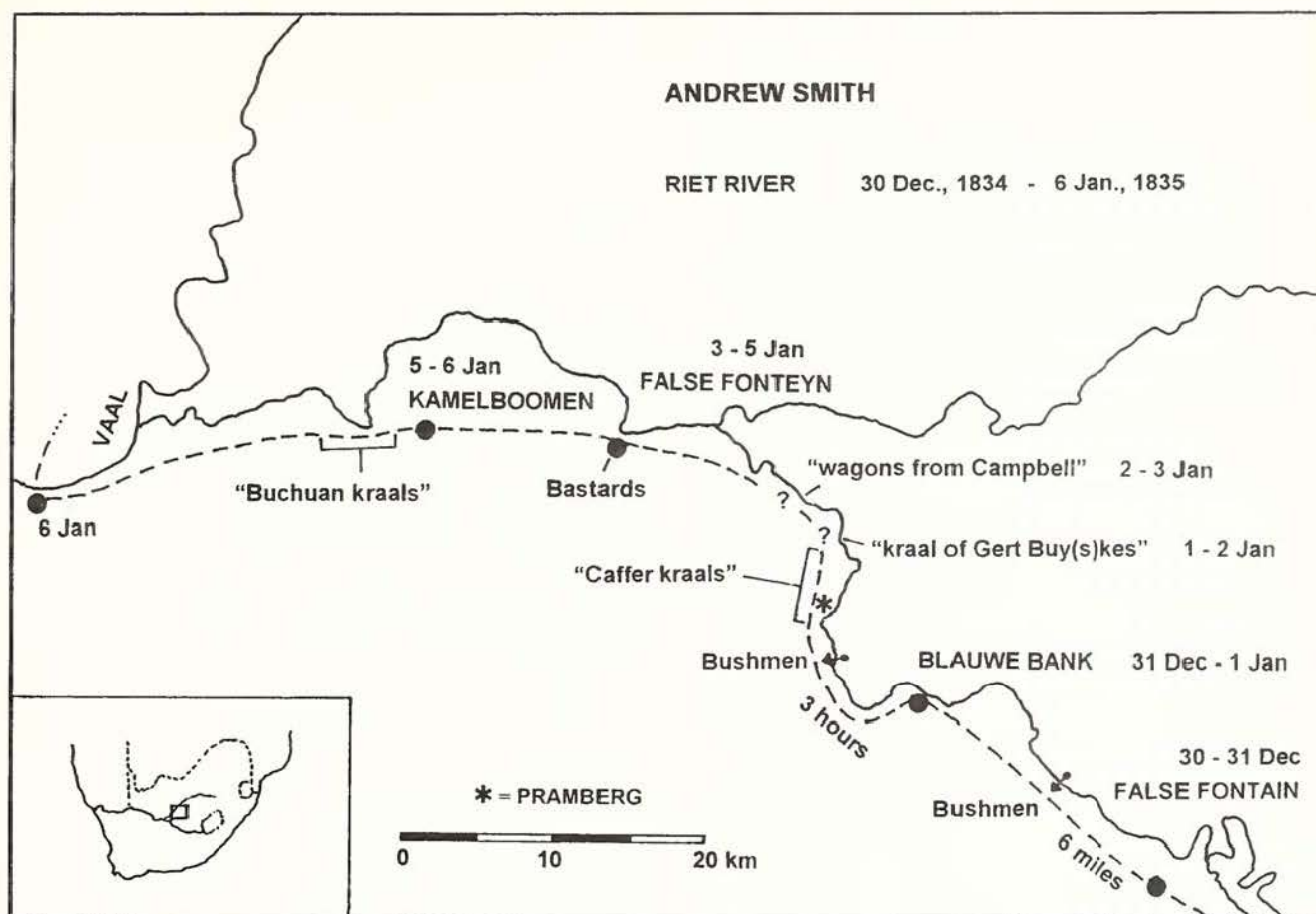


Fig. 1. Map showing the route along the Rier River followed by Andrew Smith. Dates indicate overnight stops while the names represent the approximate positions of the various groups met along the river.

day) must have been very close to, if not actually on, the present day farm of Khartoum on which occur some Type R settlements (Humphreys 1972, 1973). This suggestion as to the meeting point is based on Clement's (1967:92) estimate that in a wagon "a normal speed of 2 - 2½ miles per hour could be maintained for eight hours (i.e. 16 - 20 miles a day) when spread over two or three scofts and three miles an hour was possible in very easy conditions". By the evening of 1 January Smith had reached "the kraal of Gert Buyskes (Buyskes)" which can only be located rather tenuously by further extending Clement's estimate of the speed of wagon travel. Of more immediate interest, however, is the fact that along the way he encountered "several small kraals, some of Caffers under the protection of Cornelius Kok, this being a portion of the country given up to him to govern". These kraals might have been occupied by Xhosa rather than Tswana because the latter are referred to specifically further down the river as 'Buchuan' (Fig 1.); Xhosa are believed to have been in the general area from at least the mid 1790s (Anderson 1987). Whatever the limitations of calculations based on Clement's formula, there can be no doubt that these "several small kraals" must have overlapped very considerably the Pramberg area under consideration here.

Combining the archaeological evidence and Smith's historical record, therefore, it is clear that a range of

settlement combinations must have existed around or on Pramberg over a relatively short period of time. These include the apparently recently abandoned Type R settlements, the kraals of "Caffers" under the influence of the Campbell Griqua, Gert Buyskes (probably also under Griqua influence) and the Bushmen of the area who, from Smith's evidence, were used to 'passers by', as well as "Boers" who lived along other parts of the Riet. Each of these groups of settlements, and the cultural influences associated with them, must have left their own particular signatures. These have not been recognised and accommodated in the existing model of activity along the Riet River. The question is, to what extent is relevant evidence beginning to emerge?

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE PRAMBERG AREA

Following heavy rains in 1988, Brink *et al.* (1992) undertook rescue excavations at Pramberg. In the course of this work, they recovered three human skeletons. The graves appear to be related to the general burial pattern established for the area and so, in the absence of further detailed physical examination, add little to our knowledge of this aspect of the archaeology of the Riet River. Of potentially greater significance, however, is a midden located in Area T as documented by Brink *et al.* (1992) which yielded a faunal sample as well as a range of Later Stone Age artefacts. This midden was not associated with

any of the Type R settlements located at Pramberg but was situated in an apparently isolated position. A major problem in the research on the Type R settlements in general has been the absence of any associated middens or, indeed, of deposits of any notable depth within the settlements. The faunal samples from settlements obtained by Maggs (1971) and Humphreys (1972) were diffused through the excavated deposit and consequently relatively small. As Brink *et al.* (1992:60) remark, these samples "show a very limited taxonomic range and probably give a distorted picture of the subsistence strategy adopted". Maggs (1971:56), however, concluded that at the Type R settlement designated OFD 1 cattle and small stock supplied the majority of the protein food. Brink *et al.* (1992), on the other hand, suggest on the basis of the Area T midden, an essentially hunting economy supplemented largely by cattle and to a lesser extent sheep/goat. While this new sample hardly clarifies the range of subsistence strategies along the Riet, it does show that various combinations of faunal remains occur at localities along the Riet. These variations could be related to seasonal differences if they were to be shown to be contemporary or, more likely, to cultural preferences or emphases given the archaeological Type R record and the historical context evident from Smith's writings.

Other recent work by Dreyer (1996) in the Pramberg area has even more direct implications for the Riet River settlement patterns. Dreyer (1996) has described what he calls "a natural occurrence" which resulted in vitrified clay rubble which, he suggests, could be confused with 'slag' from Iron Age sites. This occurrence could, however, be interpreted in another way. Elsewhere Dreyer (1992:265-6) has emphasised the fact that research on Iron Age settlements (and, by implication presumably, Type R settlements as well) has tended to concentrate on visible stone structures and ignore structures that might have been made of perishable materials thereby resulting in a distorted or incomplete reconstruction of the entire settlement pattern. Maggs's (1971) work at OFD 1 established the existence of a series of post holes and although he was unable to identify the nature and shape of the structure concerned, his evidence did show that perishable structures had been erected in some sort of combination with the stone walls which characterize the Type R settlements. The archaeological detection of the existence of perishable structures along the Riet River could thus lead one to suggest, contrary to Dreyer's view, that the narrow semicircle of burnt reeds, some 2.5 m in diameter, was the result of a fire not among naturally occurring reeds but one which destroyed some sort of reed hut construction. The fact that this particular structure was not associated with any stone ruins would suggest, further, that it was part of a different type of settlement structure - one possibly associated with one or other group like those recorded by Andrew Smith on his journey.

Yet another angle on activities along the Riet which is pertinent to the present discussion is emerging from the

work of Jacobson *et al.* (1994a) where PIXE analysis of pottery samples is providing insights into a range of cultural influences. Indeed, they remark, echoing a view expressed by Humphreys (1988) and in line with the thinking behind these comments, that "variability in pottery might ... better be approached in terms of a multi-cultural regional 'mosaic' than by way of the bounded ethnic or techno-economic units of study that have characterised much past research" (Jacobson *et al.* 1994a:240). The 'multi-cultural' character of pottery from a range of Type R sites away from Pramberg has already been demonstrated in another paper by Jacobson *et al.* (1994b). In this work they show that of the three of the rare decorated sherds from Type R sites sampled, two are of local manufacture while one "is likely to be an import from the north". They suggest, moreover, that the two were "locally made in imitation of the northern styles" (Jacobson *et al.* 1994b:903). This interpretation carries with it the implication not only of simple trade or barter but actual cultural interchange. It would thus appear that a degree of complexity comparable to, but different from, that evident from the historical record existed during Type R settlement times but that this complexity has yet to be untangled.

CONCLUSION

As even the limited historical record left by Andrew Smith demonstrates, the Riet River area was one in which complex cultural interaction and interchange took place. The recent work outlined above shows that it might be possible to develop a more detailed model of interaction along the Riet based on sound archaeological data. It is to be hoped that further effort will be expended in this direction for here is an area which could become a prime example of a more socially rather than technologically driven explication of the past. To repeat again the words of Van Riet Lowe (1931) with reference to the Type R settlements, it "is a field pregnant with potentialities".

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