

A RIET RIVER BURIAL FROM KOFFIEFONTEIN, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In October 1997 a human burial was rescued from an erosional context next to the Riet River on the farm Poortjie, Koffiefontein District, Free State Province, South Africa. The stone-lined and capped grave housed an adult female buried in a vertically flexed position. An undecorated miniature pottery bowl and three cowrie shells were recovered as associated grave goods. The Poortjie burial is ¹⁴C determined to 250 ± 45 BP and it is the sixth of 87 excavated Riet River burials to be dated. The burial is located 42,5 m from a Type R stone-walled settlement and 310 m from two rock-engravings and a gong rock. The Poortjie burial is described with reference to the identity of Riet River burials and the authorship of Type R settlements. The ethics of excavating human remains, even in such 'rescue' contexts, is also considered.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's western Free State and eastern Northern Cape Provinces constitute an interior plain made up of 260 million year old Ecca Group geology within the Karoo Supergroup (King 1980:537,556; Catuneanu *et al.* 1998). The ecology of this region may be characterised as semi-arid Eastern Mixed Nama Karoo rich in medicinal plants and geophytes and which receives 300-500 mm of patchy summer rain (Low & Rebelo 1996:55). The current ecology is largely a function of overgrazing and Acocks (1975:7-10) has suggested greater Bushveld coverage until AD 1400, with sweetveld grasses around the Riet River in the east. The perennial Riet River, which the !Kora, a Khoekhoen herder people, called *Gama!ab or 'Muddy River' (Nienaber & Raper 1977:419-420), runs through the lower western Free State and into the Northern Cape to its confluence with the Vaal River or Hei-!Garib (Fig. 1). The Riet River is a dominant topographical feature and natural focus for human activity. Gatherer-hunters ancestral to the San¹ have left behind near-countless Middle and Later Stone Age lithics (*e.g.*, Sampson 1972; Humphreys & Thackeray 1983) and thousands of rock-engravings (*e.g.*, Johnson 1910:70-78; Morris 1988). The Riet River region played a formative role in the development of Southern African archaeology. It was here that Goodwin & Van Riet Lowe based much of their pioneering 1929 Southern African lithic sequence. Van Riet Lowe went so far as to describe the area as "...rich beyond the dreams of even an archaeologist" (1931:434). Though not a region of Iron Age settlement on account of its aridity (*e.g.*, Humphreys 1976),

there are at least 92 low (maximum height 1 m) and extensive stone circles that cluster in groups of 2-13. These settlements follow 135 km of the Riet River between the Kalkfontein Dam and Plooyburg (Fig.1), with a noticeable concentration between Koffiefontein and Jacobsdal. Here they occur every 5-8 km and are always built within 3 km of the Riet River - hence their designation Type 'R' or 'Riet' by Maggs (1971). Though Type R settlements have a physical structure distinct from known Late Iron Age settlements, it is not entirely certain who built them. Type R settlements do not have an abundant material culture - a function of the harsh environment and the episodic way in which these settlements seem to have been occupied. Excavations reveal both hunted game and domestic stock remains (Maggs 1971; Humphreys 1973; Brink *et al.* 1992). Numerous grinding patches attest to the use of plant resources. Freshwater mussel shells and stone fish traps indicate utilisation of riverine resources (Stamelman 1948: 73; Willcox 1965:139-140). Metal finds are rare but Later Stone Age lithics are abundant. The plain, well-fired and thick Type R pottery constitutes a singular local style with cosmopolitan influences (Jacobson *et al.* 1994, 1998). It is better made than gatherer-hunter grass-tempered ware and has elements of Khoekhoen pastoralist pottery (*cf.* Sadr & Sampson 1999), with a hint of more northerly Black farmer pottery. Available dating evidence places the building of Type R settlements to between AD 1380-AD 1780 (Maggs 1976:44; Humphreys 1997:78). Though mostly abandoned prior to the early 18th-century travels of Burchell, Campbell and Smith, historic and ethnographic evidence shows the Riet River as home to a heterogeneous mix of San,

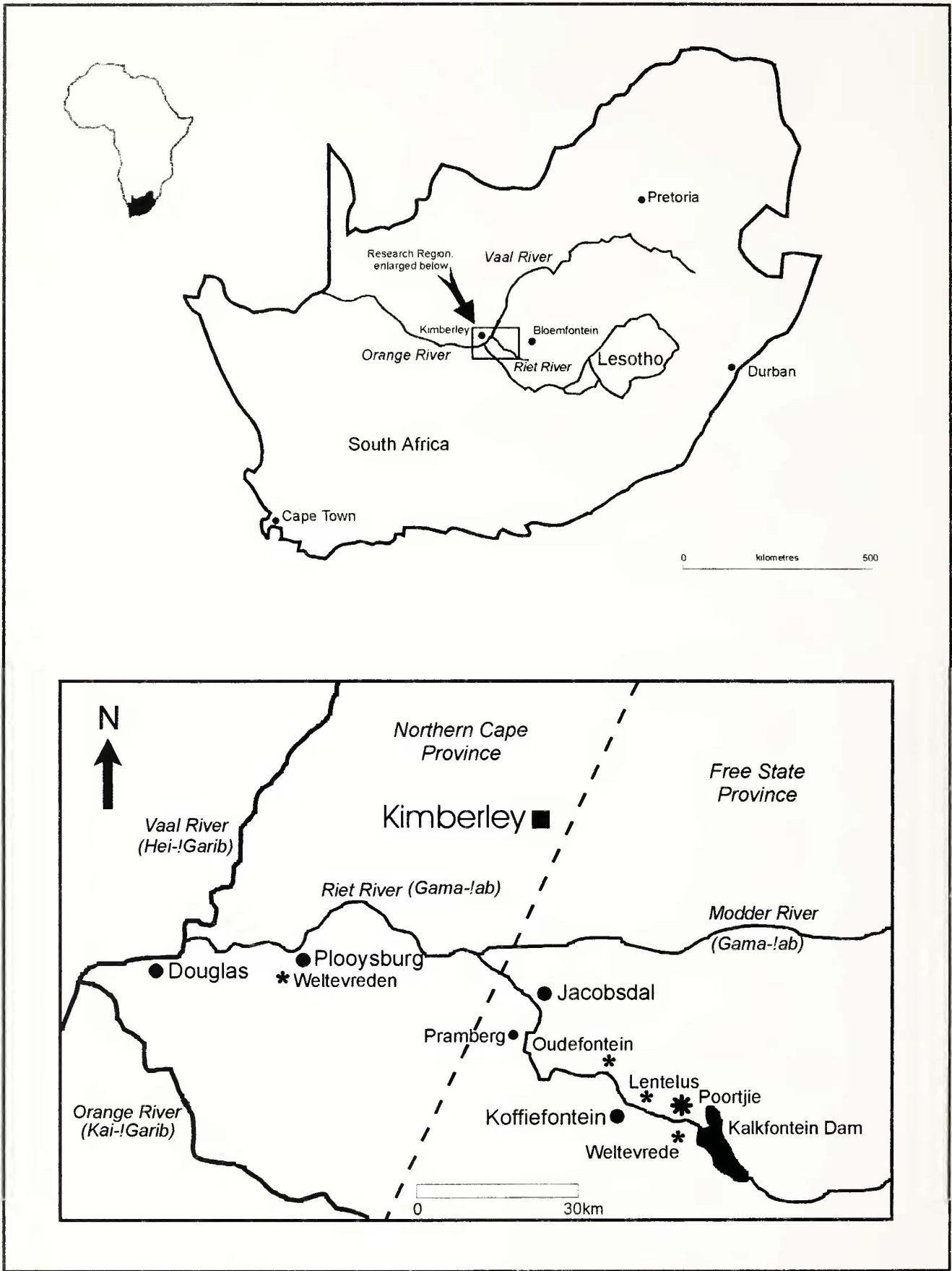


Fig. 1: Research region with locations of dated Riet River burials.

Khoekhoen (!Kora and Griqua), Black (Tswana and Xhosa) and White (Boers and hunter-travelers) (Humphreys 1975, 1997) groups, most of whom appear to have been relatively recent residents. The combination of excavational contextual and ethnographic evidence points strongly to stock-owning San as the builders and occupiers of Type R settlements (Maggs 1971; Humphreys 1972, 1997; see also Beaumont & Vogel 1984:95). These people combined a traditional gathering and hunting lifestyle with a pastoralist one and though a distinctive local group, they had links with many of their neighbours. Charles Sirr Orpen, for example, encountered Kwa-ha, a San man whose mother was a 'Bushwoman' and father a 'Gonah Hottentot' (1877:83). Kwa-ha was born and resident near Bethulie, 110 km south-east of Kalkfontein Dam. He said: "I can speak Bushman language well, but I cannot understand the Bushmen of Riet River; their language is 'too double'" (Orpen 1877:85): suggesting a distinct San or perhaps Khoe group. This 'Khoe-San' identification is confirmed by skeletal evidence from graves excavated along the Riet River, many of which were sited next to Type R settlements (Morris 1984, 1992:171-172).

These Riet River burials are located on the river bank or terrace and are most concentrated between Kalkfontein Dam and Jacobsdal (Maggs 1976:44; Morris 1992:25-26) (Fig. 1) - neatly overlapping the core area of Type R settlements. In addition, just as Type R settlements are far fewer between Jacobsdal and Plooyburg, so too do Riet River burials become scarcer (but see Humphreys 1982). Since William Fowler - Walter Battiss' archaeological mentor - excavated the first such burial in 1922, 86 skeletons have been recovered from 83 graves (Humphreys 1970; Humphreys & Maggs 1970; Morris 1984:33-37; 1992:17-18,25-38; Brink *et al.* 1992:56-57). Alan Morris' physical anthropological research identifies these skeletons as "likely to represent a single, relatively homogenous population" (1992:152) that could be 'San' or 'Khoe' but most probably San with uni-directional gene flow to northern Sotho-Tswana farmers and which have little in common with known Khoekhoen groups living further down the lower Orange River or Kai-!Garib (Morris 1984:320, 1992:154). Most of the 86 Riet River skeletons were recovered from primary burials and 35 had associated grave goods - a context that favours the expression of group and individual identities (*e.g.*, Chapman *et al.* 1981; Carr 1995). I now describe one further such Riet River burial from the farm Poortjie in the Free State's Koffiefontein District.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POORTJIE BURIAL

In October 1997 Mark Liddell of Koffiefontein reported a burial eroding out of the Riet River's terrace on the farm Poortjie 990, which is 11 km south-east of Koffiefontein (Fig. 1). The burial was located at 29.27.23 S; 25.07.09 E in an erosion ditch or 'donga' that drains into the Riet River 450 m to the south-west (Fig. 2). The upper part of an oval grave pit had been exposed by erosion and human remains

were protruding out of it. The buried person's severely weathered cranium was visible and bone fragments lay exposed on open ground next to the grave. A diminutive but well-made and undecorated grit-tempered pottery bowl was also exposed. (Fig. 3). The burial's stone sides and capping had provided some protection, but the surrounding ground level had eroded by up to a metre's depth and total destruction was imminent. The burial's parlous state was probably initiated by the 1988 floods that destroyed three Riet River burials at Pramberg near Jacobsdal (Brink *et al.* 1992) (Fig. 1). Immediate action was required to prevent further destruction and the burial was excavated on 12th-13th October 1997. Adapting the technique developed by Humphreys & Maggs (1970:116), a 2 m x 2 m grid was set up over the grave with N1, N2, S1 & S2 quadrants (Fig. 4). The grave pit had maximum surviving horizontal dimensions of 850 mm x 780 mm and vertical dimensions of 450 mm below the present surface level and 220 mm above it. Allowing for that portion of the grave already lost to erosion, this falls within the 0.6 m - 1.4 m depth range recorded for Riet River burials (Morris 1992:28). N1 & N2 were excavated first and a section drawn, after which S1 & S2 were excavated (Figs. 4 & 5). The burial was capped by at least eight small rocks and six larger rocks formed the grave's sides. Seven additional rocks of a similar size range lay within 1 m of the grave's perimeter and may have been part of the grave's walls or may have formed additional layers of soil-separated capping such as was recorded for at least nine other Riet River burials (van Riet Lowe 1931:432; Humphreys & Maggs 1970:118-119; Morris 1992:28). The Poortjie grave's infill consisted of hard, gritty brown soil that did not powder easily despite containing many small rootlets. There had been termite activity in S2. The original contours of the oval and bowl-shaped grave pit were easily discernible (Fig. 6) as the infill, though hard, was much softer than the very hard red ground of the river terrace and the even harder, shallower ground beyond. The Poortjie person was buried in a seated, vertically flexed position. The bones are almost complete but brittle. The body had suffered considerable downward and northward torsion. The spine thus ended up on a north-south axis and the head faced north-north-west. The legs were drawn up and the arms held between chest and legs, with forearms resting just below the knees. Most of the toes and some fingers survived. The arm and leg bones are all present, though their epiphyses are in a poor condition. The vertebrae and one scapula (the other was missing) are preserved, as are most of the ribs. The upper half of the cranium had weathered away completely. The mandible and 27 teeth are in good condition. The pelvis was fragmented but sufficiently intact to identify the person as an adult female.

GRAVE GOODS

Grave goods have been recovered from 35 (17 female) of the 83 Riet River graves (Humphreys 1970; Morris 1984; Appendix 1, 1992:28-33; Brink *et al.* 1992:56-57). These

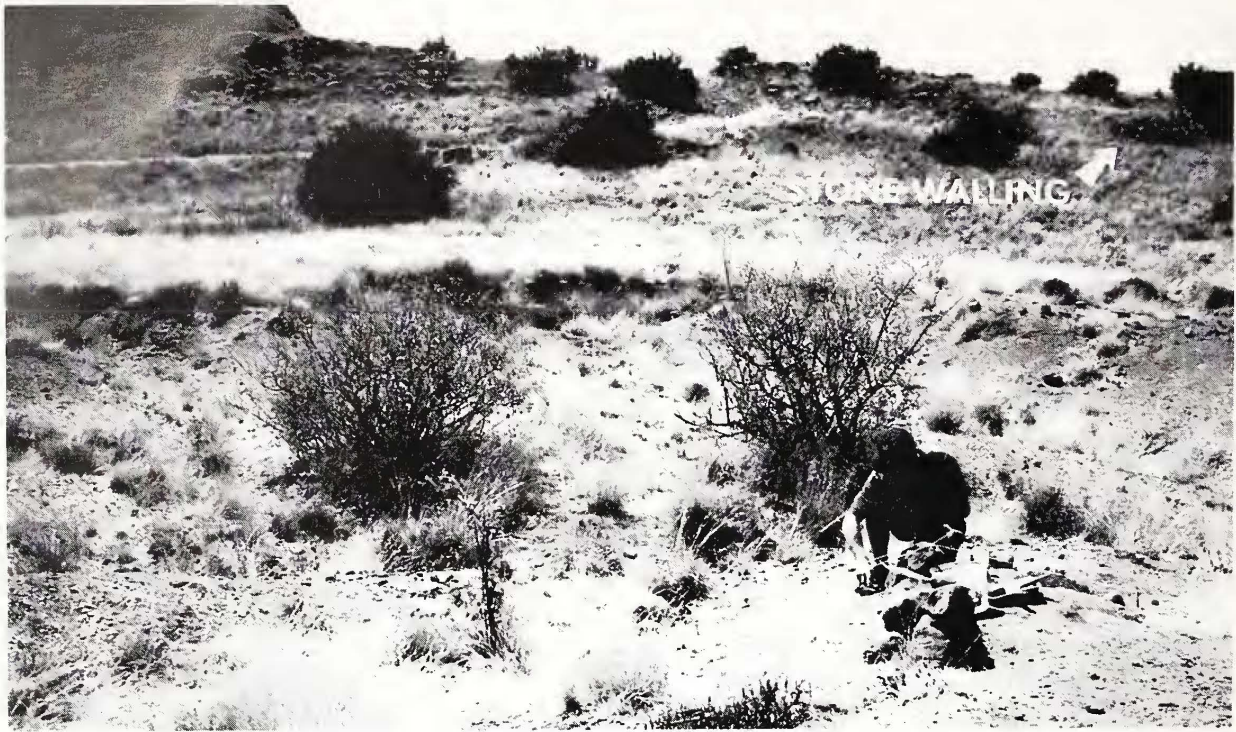


Fig 2: View to the east of erosion threatening Poortjie burial. Note the Type R stone walls.



Fig. 3: View to the south-east of the Poortjie burial before excavation.

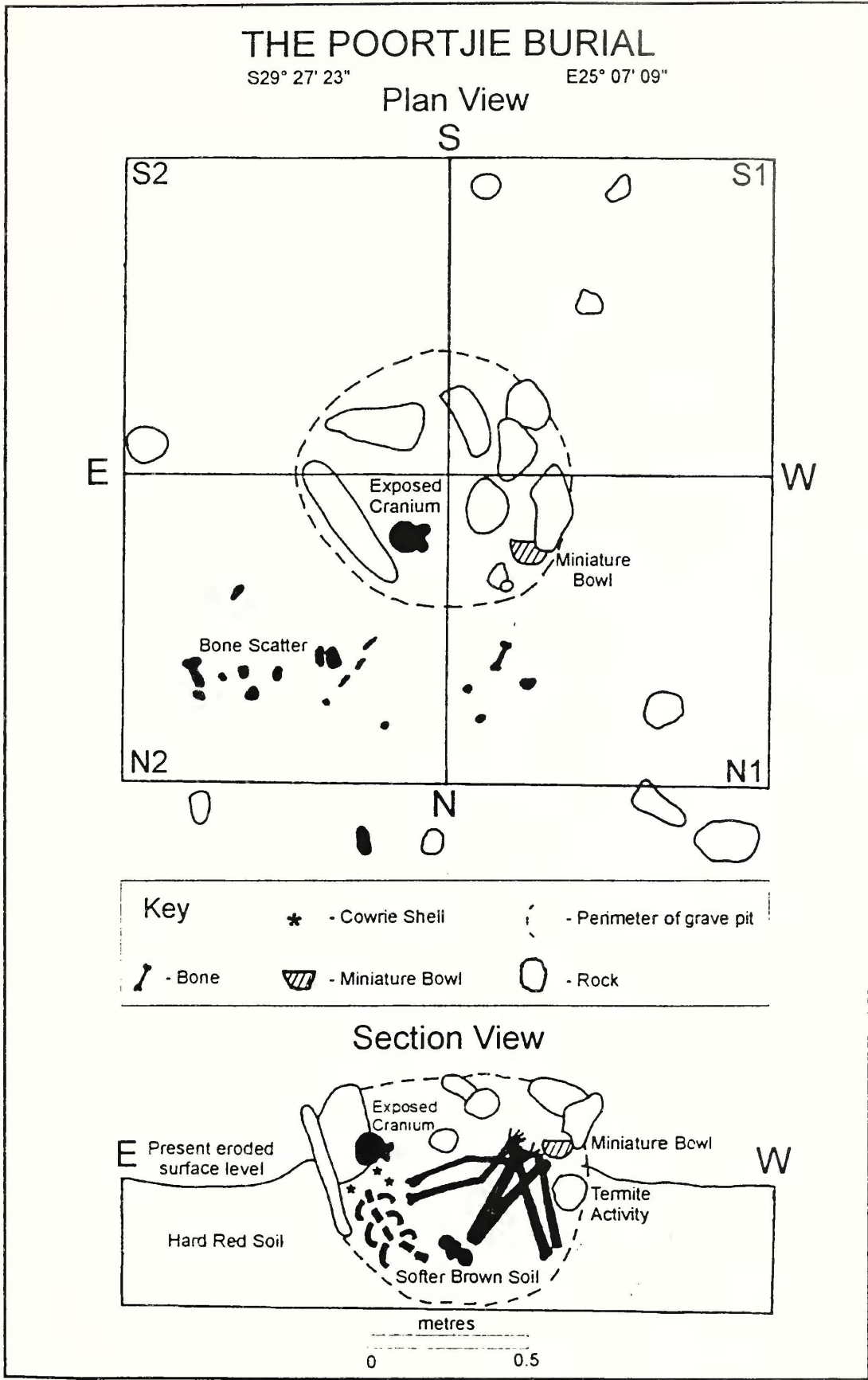


Fig. 4: Plan and section drawings of the Poortjie burial.

grave goods include: animal bone ornaments - such as a sheep/goat metacarpal pendant and cattle teeth from a female's grave - in 8 graves (2 female, 4 male, 2 juvenile); bored stones in 3 graves (2 female, 1 male); copper bangles, beads and earrings in 7 graves (3 female, 4 male); cowrie shells in 8 graves (4 female, 2 male, 1 juvenile, 1 unknown); glass beads in 3 graves (1 female, 1 male, 1 juvenile); grindstones in 4 graves (1 female, 3 male); ostrich eggshell beads in 20 graves (9 female, 8 male, 3 juvenile); pottery in 3 graves (2 female, 1 unknown); tortoise shell fragments in a juvenile's grave; a sharpened slate slab in a male's grave and a red ochre and specularite sprinkling in another male's grave. The Poortjie burial confirms this pattern with four items recovered as grave goods: three mature cowrie shells (*Cypraea* spp.; probably *ursellus*, which occurs between KwaZulu-Natal and Moçambique) and a single undecorated, grit-tempered and well-fired pottery bowl (Fig. 7). The grave infill was sifted through 6 mm and 3 mm mesh, but no further grave goods were found. The cowrie shells were located near the person's neck (Fig. 4) and were probably part of a necklace or even the headdress favoured by at least some historic Riet River inhabitants. William Burchell, for example, noted the following on 12th November 1811 near the Riet and Vaal Rivers' confluence: "We were visited by a party of fourteen Bushmen... Several of them wore two or three cowries interwoven with their hair." (*vide* Humphreys 1975:25). The pottery bowl was placed near the person's knees and hands and it is very small - even miniature - with dimensions of 120 mm diameter and 55 mm high. The walls are 3 mm thick at the rim and thicken to 14 mm at the base. This bowl is markedly finer than the up to 40 mm thick pottery fragments found at the adjacent Type R stone-walled settlement and it may represent a purpose-made grave goods item. The bowl's one side is distorted; perhaps from the weight of the grave's capping. Interestingly, three other miniature pottery bowls have been recovered as Riet River burial grave goods. A virtually identical 110 mm diameter and 60 mm high bowl was found in an unsexed flood-damaged Type R burial at Pramberg, 46 km to the north-west (Brink *et al.* 1992:57). The other two miniature bowls were recovered from 'crouched' female graves on Lentelus, 6,5 km west-north-west of Poortjie (Humphreys 1970:105,108; Morris 1992:30). The Lentelus bowls are 76 mm and 83 mm high (Maggs 1971:52; see also Goodwin & van Riet Lowe 1929: plate 36) and both were accompanied by cowrie shells, hinting at an emic association of: females - seated position - miniature pottery bowls - sea shells. In addition, one Lentelus burial is ¹⁴C dated to AD 1560 (Morris 1984:332, 1992:33). Given these graves' striking similarity with their seated positions, geographical proximity and near-identical grave goods, I decided to test for a temporal correspondence.

AGE DETERMINATION OF THE POORTJIE BURIAL

A ¹⁴C age determined to 250 ± 45 BP (Pta-7923), calibrated to AD 1655 (1669) 1681; 1749-1806, was returned from a

200 g sample of the Poortjie person's left femur. The Poortjie and Lentelus burials may thus be no more than 100 years apart. The Poortjie date is also consistent with four other Riet River burials excavated between Koffiefontein and Jacobsdal (Fig. 1) and dated to between AD 1060 - AD 1840 (Table 1). These numbers are also in agreement with two excavated Type R settlements - Oudefontein and Khartoum - that cover the period AD 1470 - AD 1800 (Maggs 1976:44). There is, however, one seemingly anomalous Riet River burial located far to the west at Weltevreden near Plooyburg and dated to 3360 ± 60 BP (Humphreys 1974) (Fig. 1) which, if reliable, suggests an undeniably 'San' antiquity for the very distinctive Riet River burial pattern.

DISCUSSION

Authoring Riet River burials and Type R settlements

The Poortjie burial is typical of the very distinctive Riet River burial pattern (*e.g.*, Morris 1992:26-29). It is a deep (0.67 - 1.0 m), stone-capped oval grave pit housing a seated and vertically flexed female skeleton with associated grave goods. The presence of exotic cowrie shells shows a people with extensive social and trading networks. This is supported by the answer given to Burchell's 1811 query to the cowrie-wearing San: "On inquiring whence these [cowrie] shells had been procured, I could get no further information than that of their having being obtained from their neighbours by barter" (*vide* Humphreys 1975:25). Such barter may have extended to their pottery too; at least in terms of cultural interchange. In a related manner the Riet River burials share elements with Khoe, San and Black farmer's burial patterns. For example, Silberbauer recorded for the Khoekhoen: 'Burials having a grave covering of stone cairns found with the body interred in the vertical-flexed position and stones placed on, around and below the deceased are key attributes of pastoralist (Hottentot) mortuary practices' (1979:61; see also Barnard 1992:192-193,252). Gatherer-hunter San burials are extremely rare in the central interior and are shallow, seldom have any capping and may have simple grave goods (Morris 1992:65). Black farmer's graves tend to be dominated by males and infants buried within the settlement precinct; often in the cattle kraal or its walls. Grave goods, cairns and the vertically flexed position are common (Morris 1992:66-67). Perhaps what distinguishes the Poortjie burial is that it is not an isolated inhumation. Within 35 m of it in locations not threatened by erosion there are at least 6 stone cairns visually identical to Riet River burial cappings. Similar cemeteries have been noted for other Riet River burials (*e.g.*, Morris 1992:26-28). These cemeteries are all adjacent to Type R settlements and 42,5 m to the north-north-east of the Poortjie burial is a Type R settlement that consists of a 25 m - 30 m diameter primary enclosure and at least five smaller enclosures (Fig. 2). An episodic low stone wall encircles about 40% of this settlement. There are more than two dozen pan-shaped lower grinding surfaces and one lenticular such surface in and around this settlement. There are also rocks that show signs of having sharpened metal



Fig. 5: Plan and section photographs of the Poortjie burial.



Fig. 6: Photograph of the Poortjie burial after excavation showing grave pit.



Fig. 7: Poortjie grave goods – three cowrie shells and a miniature bowl.

Table 1. Dated Riet River Burials.

Skeleton's Locality	Lab number	¹⁴ C years BP	Calibrated date	Reference
Weltevreden, Herbert District, Northern Cape.	Pta-681	3360±60	Uncalibrated	Humphreys 1974
Welteverde, Koffiefontein District, Free State.	Pta-2898	890±50	AD 1060	Morris 1992:32
Lentelus, Koffiefontein District, Free State.	Pta-2894	390±50	AD 1560	Morris 1992:32
Oudefontein, Koffiefontein District, Free State.	Pta-247	380±50	AD 1570	Maggs 1971:56
Poortjie, Koffiefontein District, Free State.	Pta-7923	250±45	AD 1655 (1669) 1681; 1749-1806	This paper
Oudefontein, Koffiefontein District, Free State.	Pta-248	110±50	AD 1840	Maggs 1971:56

objects. Two halves of a square and an oval bored stone with very narrow perforations lay within one of the smaller enclosures. There are many informal Later Stone Age lithics and thick pottery fragments. A small but steep-sided gully or 'kloof' with semi-permanent water is located 140 m north-north-west of the Type R settlement and 310 m north-west of the grave. On the 'kloof's' western side a split dolerite rock bears two patinated rock-engravings of roughly pecked-infill human figures with their arms held out at 90° to their bodies and with a protrusion between their legs. These images could be either San or Khoe authored. On the 'kloof's' eastern side there is a dolerite 'gong rock' such as are often associated with San rock-engraving sites (Ouzman 2001). The Poortjie burial and its associated archaeological context supports the notion that Riet River burials are directly linked to Type R stone-walled settlements and both belong to a Khoe-San people practicing a mixed and transhumant economy. The careful inhumation, grave goods and cemetery points to a structured cosmology, possible social stratification and indicate that these people had strong ties to specific places.

Human remains and archaeological ethics

While useful information is gained from excavating human burials – often a concentrated locus for the expres-

sion of identities, beliefs and world-understandings (*e.g.*, Parker-Pearson 1999) - the practice of disturbing the intentional inhumation of a person from a culture other than one's own remains a profoundly disturbing experience (*e.g.*, Bahn 1984; Barley 1997). Burials are perhaps the most powerful instance in which archaeology crosses over from being a dispassionate investigation into the past into being also a highly emotive practice in the present. On the one hand, we could argue that intentional inhumations were never intended to be exhumed and even when such burials are threatened by the elements our etic intervention is not required as nature shall and should take its inevitable course and reclaim the remains. On the other hand, the excavator adheres to a code of ethics and has an obligation to extract knowledge and preserve what he or she can of an ever-vanishing material record so that the information obtained can be held in trust for the nation as a whole (*e.g.*, Rahtz 1974). To these two polarities the Southern African political and cultural firmament adds a twist. Perhaps an archaeological understanding of the events and practices that led to the burial of the Poortjie and similar people may be used to aid and shape the rise of Khoe-San nationalism by providing an empirical basis for the reclamation of elements of land, language and culture that have been lost or lacking over the years. The Poortjie and similar burials

are immediately important to the present need of the Khoe-San to establish a distinctive identity, to re-assert custodianship of their culture and to engender a mutual respect and empathy (*e.g.*, Legassick & Rasool 2000; Tomaselli 2001). For example, certain Griqua individuals wished for remains thought to be Cornelius Kok's to 'lie in state' in a Museum before being reburied (Jacobson & Morris 2000:81; see also Hubert 1994); suggesting that Museums may have a function as high-status 'Keeping Places' for some human remains (Ouzman 2000:89-90). The Vermillion Accord on Human Remains provides a sound set of guidelines for the treatment of human remains (Fig. 8; see also de Jong 2001). Ideally, Khoe-San archaeologists should make the decisions on what to excavate and research. Until then, non-Khoe-San archaeologists can engage in partnership with Khoe-San representatives and make such decisions jointly. Here the Kouga 'mummy' is an example of such co-operative negotiation with archaeologists permitted two years to study the person and share the information, after which he will be reburied with due ceremony (Binneman 2000). In this case study, the uncertain identity of the Poortjie individual as broadly 'Khoe-San' combined with the absence of representative Khoe-San structures in 1997 conspired to make for both a rewarding and uncomfortable experience. Fortunately, representative Khoe-San structures such as the National Khoisan Consultative Conference (NKCC), South African San Institute (SASI) and the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities of Southern Africa (WIMSA) do now exist and can and should be consulted before human remains and other sacred objects are studied. Excavation, especially of burials, remains a fraught endeavour and one is here in mind of Sir Mortimer Wheeler's observation that: "When I'm dead you can dig me up ten times for all I care...I won't haunt you - much" (*vide* Bahn 1984:214).

NOTE

1. I use 'San' to refer to Southern Africa's First People who traditionally gathered, hunted and practiced a shamanistic form of religion. I use 'Khoe' and 'Khoekhoen' to refer to immigrant pastoralist people linguistically related to the San. I regard both as honest and honourable terms and recognise that both groups had much in common, particularly in historic times.

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The Vermillion Accord on Human Remains

Adopted at the 1989 South Dakota World Archaeological Congress Inter-Congress.

1. Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all, irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition.
2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred.
3. Respect for the wishes of local community and relatives or guardians of the dead shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful.
4. Respect for the scientific research value of skeletal, mummified and other human remains (including fossil hominids) shall be accorded when such value is demonstrated to exist.
5. Agreement on the disposition of fossil, skeletal, mummified and other remains shall be reached by negotiation on the basis of mutual respect for the legitimate concerns of communities for the proper disposition of their ancestors, as well as legitimate concerns of science and education.
6. The express recognition that the concerns of various ethnic groups, as well as those of science are legitimate and to be respected, will permit acceptable agreements to be reached and honoured.

Fig. 8: The Vermillion Accord on Human Remains.

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