

## THE BAKOPA OF THABANTŠHO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, SITE DESCRIPTION AND INITIAL EXCAVATIONS AS PART OF THE MALEOSKOP ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

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### ABSTRACT

In this article the archaeological sites on the farm Rietkloof 166 JS, in the district of Groblersdal, Mpumalanga are introduced. They form part of the Maleoskop archaeological project, which was initiated during 2001. The idea is to prepare reports as the project develops, in order to publish preliminary data, as it becomes available. The background of the identification of the sites and the project is given, as well as a brief sketch of the historical situation during the 1860s when the BaKopa of Boleu inhabited the site. In this period the first Berlin mission station north of the Vaal River, Gerlachshoop, was established in the vicinity.

During the first season of excavations four test trenches were excavated: one (BOL 1/1) on the summit of Thabantšho, another (BOL 1/3) in a major midden and two more (BOL 1/4 and BOL 1/5) in the living area indicated by burnt hut rubble and stone walls.

### INTRODUCTION

The Maleoskop archaeological project represents a research scope that covers a wide variety of archaeological sites concentrated on the farm Rietkloof 166JS, district of Groblersdal, Mpumalanga (Fig. 1). These sites include scattered open air Middle and Late Stone Age locality, a huge Late Iron Age settlement, known to be the site of the BaKopa chief, Kgoši Boleu, and remnants of the Berlin Missionary Society mission station Gerlachshoop. In a certain sense the combination of sites in the broader project area is accidental. They all happened to be situated on the Maleoskop Training Area of the South African Police Service (SAPS) when the project commenced during 2001.

The archaeological project was the direct result of a request by the SAPS that the history of the training area at Maleoskop should be recorded. Ms Anina du Plessis, amateur historian and civilian employee at the Maleoskop Training Area, undertook this task for many years. During November 2000 she and Senior Superintendent Kallie Schuldt of the SAPS introduced the archaeological sites of Maleoskop to a group of lecturers in Biblical Archaeology

at University of South Africa. Previously, during 1986, she was assured of the historical and archaeological value of these sites by a visiting team of archaeologists, including Prof A. Meyer of the University of Pretoria, Dr U. Küsel of the National Cultural Historical Museum and Ms M. van der Ryst of University of South Africa (Agripol 1986).

The status, ownership and use of the land has changed significantly in the recent past, due to a claim to the land by the BaKopa and the subsequent restitution of land in terms of the Restitution of Land Rights Act (Act 22 of 1994). (*cf* Report No. 80/1995. Portion 3 (A portion of portion 1) of Rietkloof 166 JS, District of Groblersdal, and Province of Mpumalanga: Bakgaga Bakopa Tribe).

The focus of this article is on the identification of, and initial excavations at, Thabantšho a Late Iron Age site, known to be the settlement of Boleu I, situated on the farm Rietkloof 166JS (25.13.20S; 29.32.0E) in the Groblersdal district. The historical archaeological character of research on Thabantšho necessitates a variety of research methods, including a literature review, an archival study of documentary records, archaeological excavations, surveying and mapping and the recording of oral traditions.

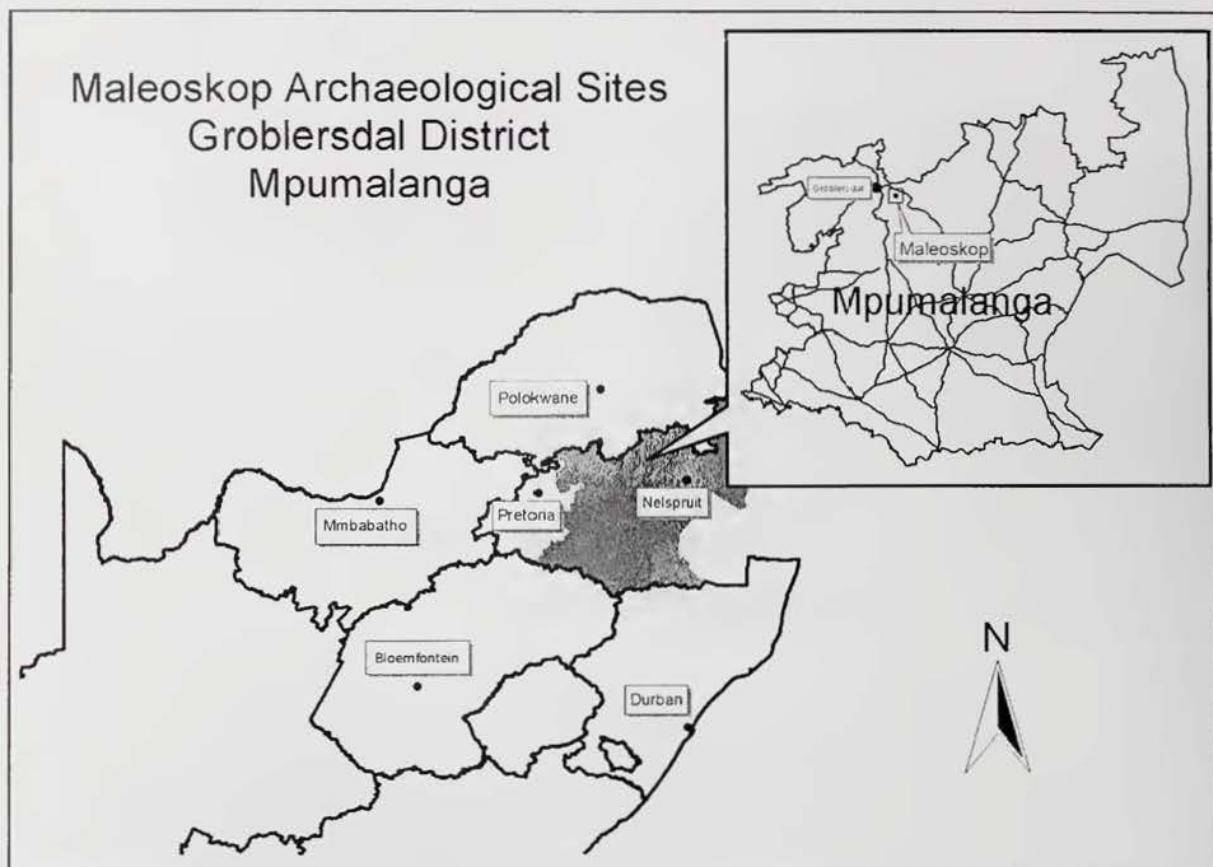


Fig. 1. Maleoskop archaeological sites, Groblersdal District, Mpumalanga.

In this first interim report the focus will be on the identification of the site of Thabantšho on the basis of literary sources, an initial overview of the surface finds, and the results of the excavations of the first four test trenches. In an accompanying article Plug and Badenhorst discuss the faunal remains found during the excavations in 2001 (Plug & Badenhorst 2004, this volume).

The prompt reporting of archaeological excavations is not particularly typical of archaeologists. The non-publication of excavation results is almost proverbial and many sites are better known through 'personal communication' than publication. This is a trend we wish not to pursue thence this first interim report. The problem is not unique to the South African archaeological scene (*cf.* Boshoff 2001:371-391).

#### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Vivid descriptions of the site where the German missionaries Heinrich Grütznert and Alexander Merensky first visited Boleu, the kgoši (chief) of the BaKopa in his village are included in diaries, recollections and articles in the newsletters of the Berlin Missionary Society (*cf.* Berliner Missionsberichte 1862:14-16; Merensky 1888:48-49; Grütznert 1900:37; Wangemann 1957:38-40; Zöllner &

Heese 1984:118-120, 253-254). The historian Ulrich van der Heyden (2003:334-354) remarked on the value of German Mission archives for the historiography of South Africa (*cf.* his edition of Merensky's reminiscences, Merensky, 1996).

These sources, especially archival records and contemporary drawings, helped significantly in the process of locating the exact site of Thabantšho (Black Mountain) (Wangemann 1868, illustration facing 402; Transvaal Archives 1860, Inspectie Rapport) (Figs 2 & 3). Initially it was clear that discrepancies existed on the specific location of Maleoskop and the settlement of the BaKopa. In his article, "Die Kôpa-nedersetting van Boleu (Maleo) in Oos-Transvaal", Bergh (1990:5-9) located the settlement in the south-eastern corner of the farm Rietkloof 166JS (see also Bergh (ed) 1999, map 6.4). However, reconnaissance in an area further north identified a hill that fits the evidence perfectly. A drawing by Theodor Wangemann, who visited Gerlachshoop and the site of Boleu's village in 1867, depicts a high central hill flanked by two smaller hills as the site of Thabantšho (or Thaba Leschuchuru/Thaba Nschu, Wangemann 1957:56, 1992:23). The original painting is part of the collection of the National Cultural History Museum (HG 6036; National Cultural History Museum 1992:23).



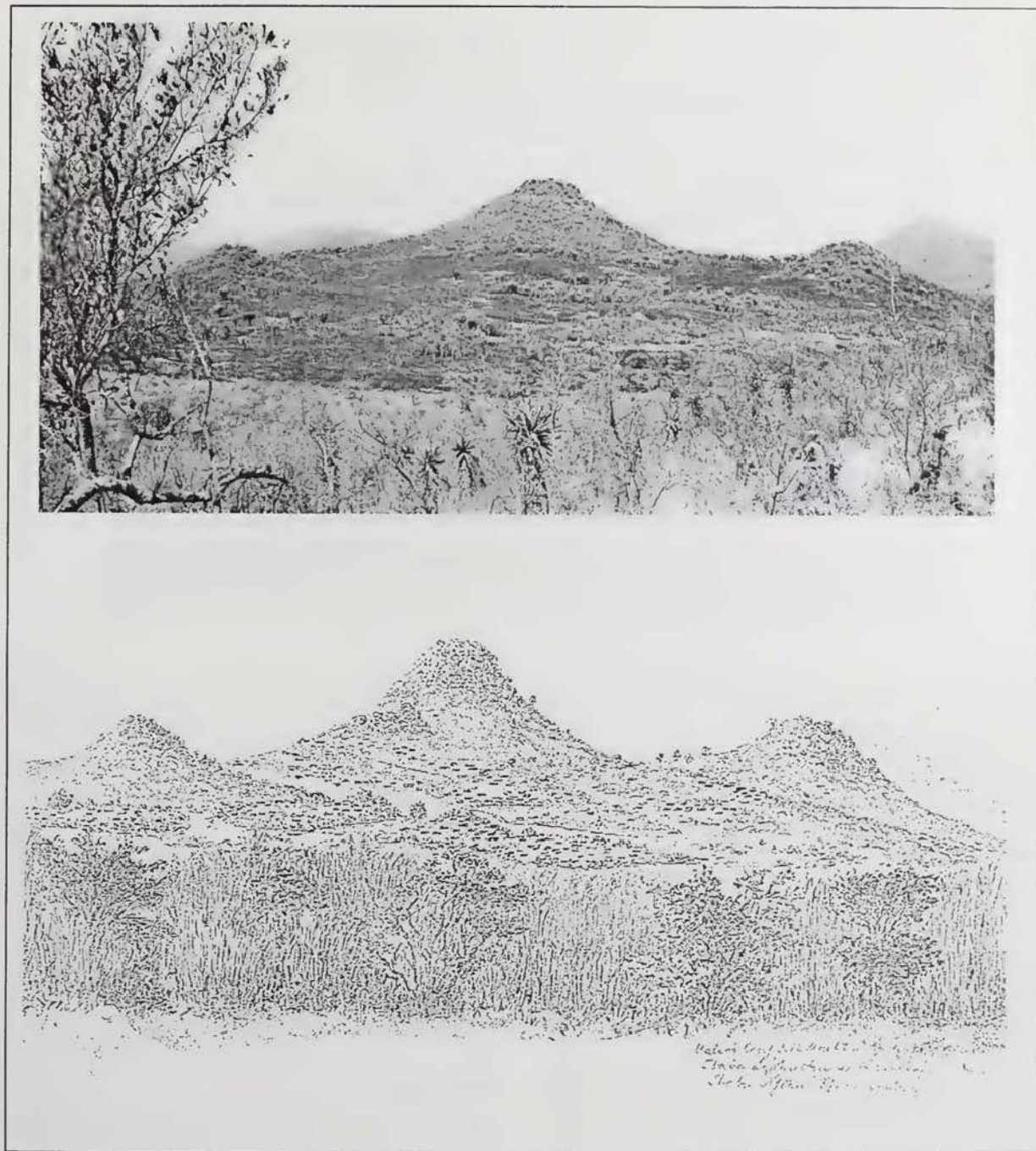


Fig. 2 & 3. Thabantšho from the north (top), and Wangemann's sketch of Thabantšho (bottom).

Evidence of extensive stonewalling, hut remains and pottery pieces, as well as correlating oral evidence, points to this site, rather than the hill purported by Bergh, as the settlement area of the BaKopa. A good reason for Bergh's positioning of the settlement where he did is the fact that modern maps indicate a prominent hill (and by far the highest hill) in the south-eastern corner of the farm Rietkloof 166 JS as "Maleoskop", while an adjacent hill is indicated as "Boleu". The three hills where Boleu's village

was situated are indicated by height only.

After being allocated two neighbouring farms, Rietkloof and Weltevreden, by the Lydenburg government in 1859, the BaKopa moved from their previous settlement on Oude Stadt to settle in the vicinity of a hill they named Thabantšho. A complex political situation existed in the area in the latter part of the 18th century. The often disturbing history of the BaKopa and the surrounding groups must be seen in the context of the various, and often

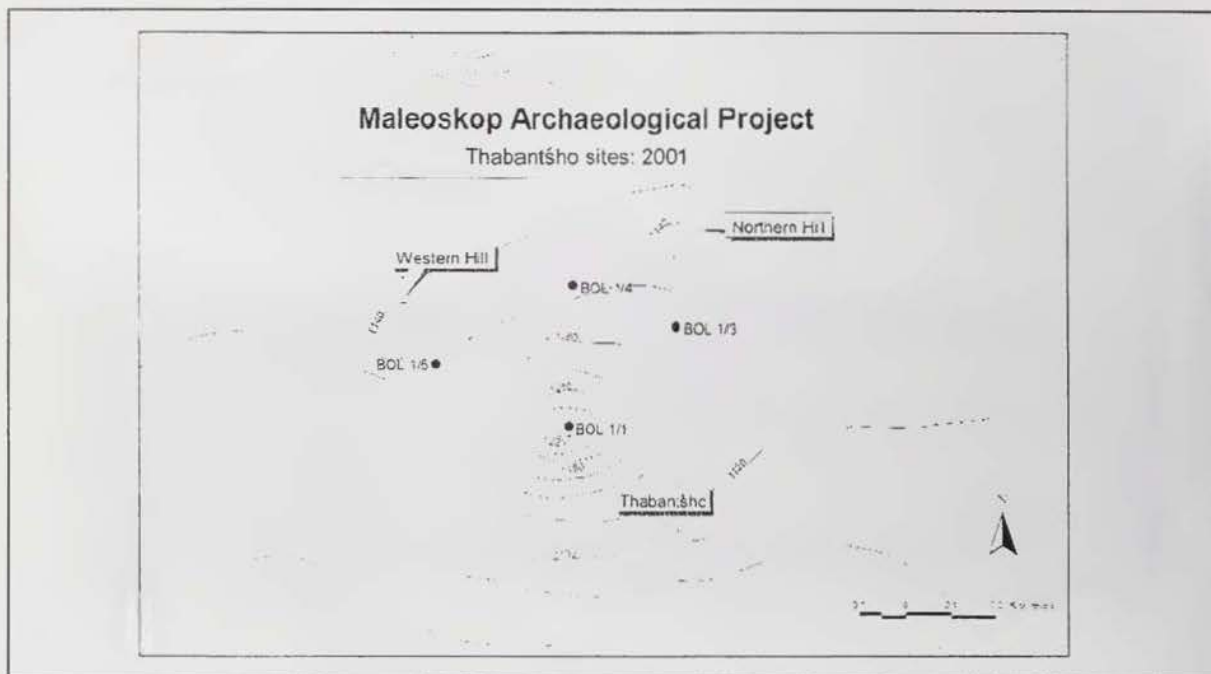


Fig. 4. The location of the test trenches, 2001 season.

very ambitious, political groups such as the Ndzundza-Ndebele under Mabhogo, the Lydenburg government, the government of the ZAR and the BaKopa. They had to compete for limited resources as well as to forge a position for themselves in the area. Factors such as the groups' inability to establish borders led to rising tensions in the area and eventually to armed clashes (Van Rooyen 1951: 142-145; Heydenrych 1991:138). Constant cattle theft, for example, necessitated the use of armed Boer patrols in the area. Mabhogo of the Ndzundza-Ndebele and Boleu (occasionally referred to as Maleo) of the BaKopa decided to resist an armed Boer patrol, which culminated in an unsuccessful reprisal attack on the BaKopa settlement in October 1863 (Du Plessis 1998:2). (The BaKopa rather than the Ndebele were attacked since Mabhogo and his people were fortified in Mapochskraal.)

The conflict intensified and with the assistance of Swazi mercenaries the BaKopa was successfully attacked on 10 May 1864. Boleu himself, approximately 850 of his soldiers and countless women and children were killed in the battle or taken captive. The survivors were either taken away by the Swazi or dispersed to the neighbouring farms and settlements (Grützner 1900:44-48; Wangemann 1877:122). A significant Christian contingent existed in the tribe as a result of the work of the Berlin missionaries stationed in the area. Initially most of the survivors returned to the area and resettled close to Gerlachshoop. Conflict with both Mabhogo and the BaPedi chief, Sekhukhune, led to the final dispersal of the BaKopa in three small groups. The Christians converged under Rammupudu, the surviving son of the king, and during January 1865 they joined the missionaries at Botshabelo, which had been founded by

Alexander Merensky (Kratzenstein 1893: 204-205; Van Rooyen T S 1951:145; Wangemann 1957:65-73). Another contingent chose to follow Matsepe, a half brother of Boleu, who settled at Leeufontein.

#### A SURFACE STUDY OF THABANTŠHO

The settlement area around the central hill was, for practical reasons, divided into three separate research areas (Fig. 4). The areas will be discussed and dealt with separately. These are:

- The central hill or Thabantšho
- The northern and western Hills
- The living areas surrounding Thabantšho

#### Thabantšho

It is easy to distinguish Thabantšho with its unique shape from the surrounding hills. The hill has a commanding view of a very large surrounding area and is well suited for a defensive role. It is probably for this reason that the hill and the surrounding area were settled. The German missionary, Theodore Wangemann, describes the hill in the following way:

The hilltop is overgrown with thick bushes of aloes, sweet thorn and tree Euphorbia, which is naturally impenetrable, but also fortified further by huge stone formations (our translation) (Wangemann 1957:38).

Reconnaissance confirmed the existence of elaborate stone walls on the slope and on the summit of Thabantšho





Fig. 5. Stone walls on the summit of Thabantšho.

(Fig. 5). The stone walls at the top encircle the summit of the hill with a central "courtyard" and "rooms" extending to the western, southern and eastern sections of the hill. A second stone wall encircles the hill lower down. This stone wall forms a continuous line around the hill. A number of smaller stone wall enclosures were found between the base of the hill and the lower stone wall mentioned above. The stone walls around the summit and lower down around the hill seem primarily to have a defensive role. This is also how the missionaries described these walls. It is possible that the stone enclosures could have been used to keep livestock. All the walls on the slopes of Thabantšho were constructed mainly of magnetite stones, which abound in the area.

A test trench, indicated as BOL 1/1, was excavated on the summit to establish the possibility of habitation. The trench consists of two arbitrary layers of 10 cm each and ended in a sterile soil layer. Apart from a small amount of charcoal and scattered non-indicative pottery pieces, no indication of habitation has been found. On completion the trench was refilled for conservation purposes.

Along the northern slope of the hill, above the lower circular wall, remains of structures of which the shape and building material appear to be unusual were found on an overgrown terrace. Four structures were found in this area and a fifth on the summit of the hill. Characteristic of these structures is that the walls were apparently plastered with red clay. One of the buildings is rectangular in form and

seems to have been built with sun dried mud bricks. In the three related structures mortar was used to plaster the stone walls. These structures are currently under investigation and the results of the excavations will be published in the near future.

#### Northern and Western Hills

Extensive stone walls were also found on the northern and the western hills. As in the case with the stone walls on Thabantšho, these walls form a continuous line around the hills. The position of these hills relative to Thabantšho and the way in which the stone walls were constructed, represent a defensive rather than a settlement function. From archival records and reports by the missionaries we know that firearms were used in intertribal conflicts of the era (*e.g.* Wangemann 1957:49). Use of firearms is evident from the presence of a number of loopholes in the stone walls. In addition to the position of the two hills and the evidence of stone-walls, no substantial evidence was found to indicate that the two flanking hills were inhabited. The use of firearms and the extensive defensive structures illustrate the turbulent atmosphere of the second half of the nineteenth century (Berliner Missionsberichte 1864:332-342; 348-353; Grützner 1900:42).

#### The Living Areas

The living area represents the largest research locale and extends from an area to the east of Thabantšho in an arc to





Fig. 6. The midden excavation, Bol 1-3.

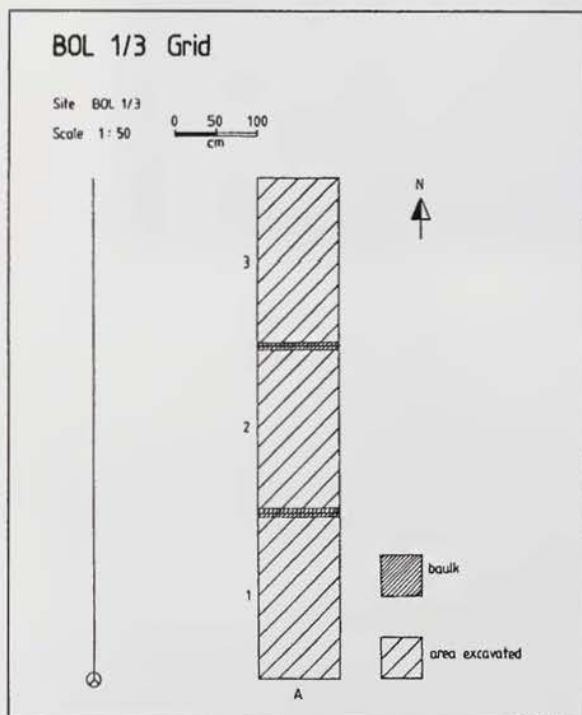


Fig. 7. BOL 1-3 Site plan.

the west. A clearly demarcated area, to the south of Thabantsho, is also found and is clearly separate from the northern living areas. These areas contain widespread hut floors and burnt hut rubble, circular stone structures and extended stone walls, middens, pottery and grinding stones. A large stone wall enclosure on the northwestern slope of Thabantsho, with a single entrance at the east, is the most prominent feature on the site. The walls are well preserved and in some places stand to a height of approximately 1,5 m. our preliminary interpretation of this feature is that it was used as the *kgoro* or royal court.

Three test trenches were excavated in the living areas during the 2001 season (Fig. 6). A trench (BOL 1/3) was dug to expose a large midden in the sloping area between Thabantsho and the Northern hill. The trench constituted

three squares of 2m x 1m each in a north-south orientation (Figs 7, 8, 9 & 10). A substantial number of faunal artifacts, potsherds, cultural objects, beads and charcoal were unearthed during the excavation phase. The trench was eventually refilled for conservation purposes.

Burnt hut debris and scattered pottery gave an indication of a living area and thus prompted the location of the excavation at BOL 1/4 (Figs 11, 12, & 13). In three separate trenches (1m x 2m, 1m x 2m and 2m x 4m) clear signs of red hut clay, pole imprints and broken pottery, of which some was found in situ, were uncovered. A hut floor was also identified. The excavation exposed a sterile layer of small stones that might have been used to level the surface for building purposes.

The excavation designated as BOL 1/5 (2m x 2m) is situated in the area between Thabantsho and the western hill (Figs 14 & 15). The presence of the enclosure (*kgoro*) discussed above, and a concentration of grinding stones, hut rubble and pottery guided the choice of location for this test trench. A substantial amount of charcoal was found as well as a number of *in situ* broken pots and upper and lower grinding stones. No decorated pottery was found in this excavation. Characteristic of this trench was the disturbance due to vegetation (especially *Euphorbia* roots) and exposure to the elements. For this reason only half of the designated area was eventually excavated. The test trench was covered with soil after the excavation had been completed.

## CONCLUSION

The combination of historical sources and archaeological information enabled us to enrich our interpretation of the material. There is no doubt that the location of the BaKopa village and the mission station, Gerlachshoop, has been positively established. Surface reconnaissance identified extensive stonewalling for defensive and demarcation purposes. In the process information on the spatial arrangement of the site has been gathered. These finds coincide with expectations raised by historical sources.

Four test trenches located in specific areas (summit, midden and living areas) yielded useful information in terms of the material culture of the people who inhabited the sites. Types of data found included datable organic material, a good collection of faunal remains, and a relatively small but significant amount of indicative pottery and indications of building methods.

Investigations at Maleoskop will continue in future seasons with the excavation of specific features detected during the surface reconnaissance. These include a possible family unit (*kgoro*) consisting of various hut floors and a demarcation wall (*cf.* Mönnig: 1967:222). Surface finds in the area include a possible courtyard with pottery, grinding stones and a midden.

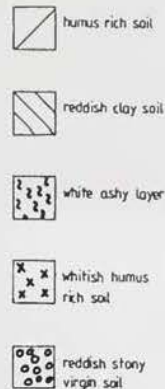
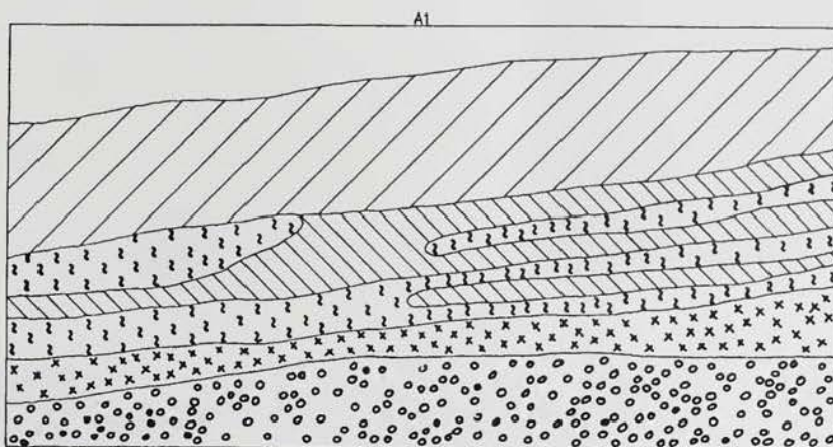
## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support and participation of various individuals and groups in the project.

### BOL 1/3 Test Trench Profile A1 - East

Site BOL 1/3

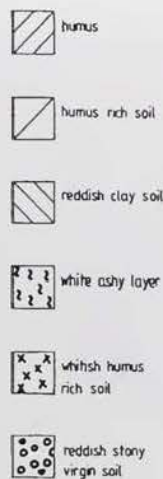
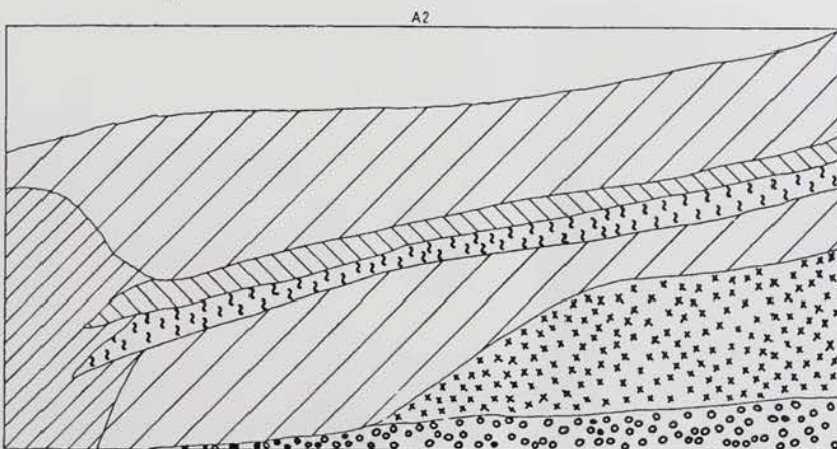
Scale 1:10 



### BOL 1/3 Test Trench Profile A2 - East

Site BOL 1/3

Scale 1:10 



### BOL 1/3 Test Trench Profile A3 - East

Site BOL 1/3

Scale 1:10 

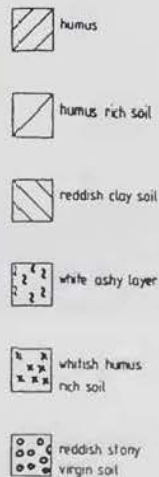
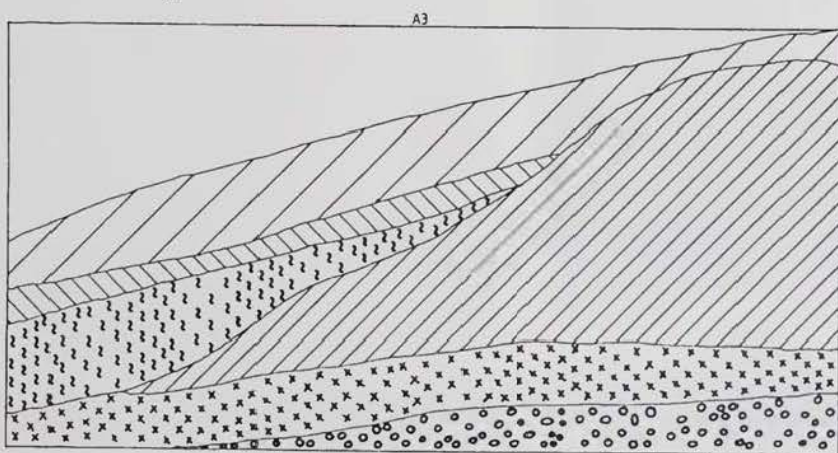


Fig. 8. BOL 1-3 profile A1 new (top), Fig. 9. BOL 1-3 profile 2A east (middle) and Fig. 10. BOL 1-3 profile A3 east (bottom).



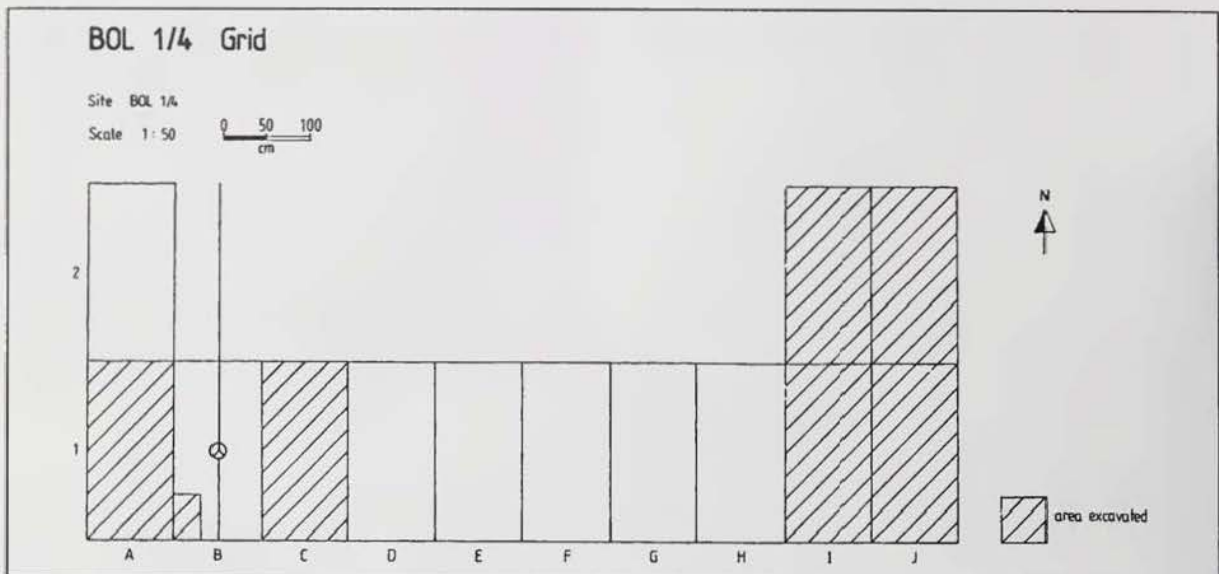


Fig. 11. BOL 1-4. Site plan.



Fig. 12. The living area excavation, BOL 1-4.

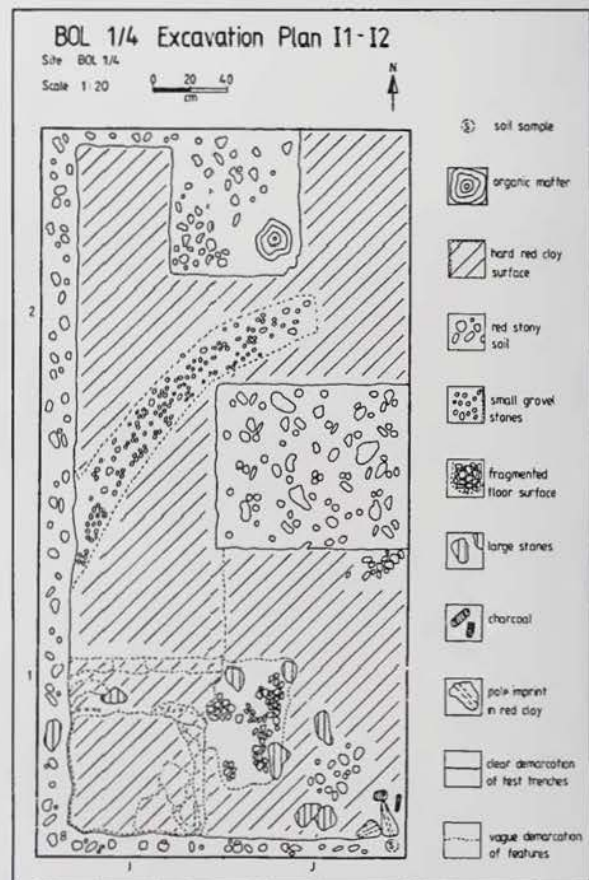


Fig. 13. BOL 1/4. Excavation plan I1-I2.

Mrs Anina du Plessis supplied us with the basic information and introduced us to Maleoskop and the history

of Boleu. The Kgoši Boleu II of Tafelkop, OC of the police-training base at Maleoskop, Kallie Schulz, rendered



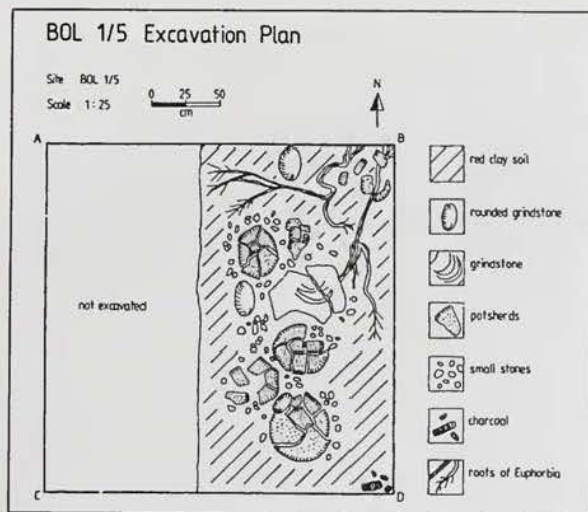


Fig. 14. BOL 1-5. Excavation Plan.

all possible assistance to enable us to do the work. Colleagues and friends, Proff Andrie Meyer (UP), Frik de Beer (Unisa) and Coenie Scheepers (Unisa), Drr Julius Pistorius (UP), Magdel le Roux (Unisa), Chris le Roux (Unisa), Messrs Helgaard Prinsloo, Johan Nel (UP), Francois Erasmus (SAHRA), Johan Enslin and mss Kitty Schneider (Unisa) and Loudine Philip (UP). Erika Cruywagen, for her contribution to the project and the maps she created. The Unisa group of students and volunteers of the Biblical Archaeology group have contributed in different ways to the project. We also want to acknowledge the professional services of Shaw Badenhorst (Transvaal Museum), Joos Esterhuisen and Sanet Eksteen (UP) and Helgaard Prinsloo.

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Fig. 15. Pottery in BOL 1-5.

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