

VESSELS FOR THE ANCESTORS: CUPULES AND THE ANNUAL RAIN-CONTROL CYCLE IN THE SHASHE-LIMPOPO CONFLUENCE AREA

M.H. SCHOEMAN & M. MURIMBIKA

*Department of Anthropology and Archaeology
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, 0002*

*School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies
University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag 3, PO WITS, 2050*

alex.schoeman@up.ac.za and blackroxes@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Cupules found on hilltop sites in the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area (SLCA) are linked to the annual cycle of rain-control. We establish this connection by combining Venda ethnography and the location of cupules on rain-control sites. Ethnographic information from the Limpopo Province re-counts that cupules are used in Venda asking and giving thanks for rain. On SLCA rain-control sites cupules often cluster around rock tanks or water retaining areas and are found in rock tanks or small pools. An un-eroded pecked cupule at the base of one of the rock tanks, below Leopard's Kopje deposit suggests that cupules became part of SLCA farmer rain-control in, or immediately before the K2-Mapungubwe period.

INTRODUCTION

Round cup shaped hollows occur on a wide variety of sites and rock surfaces, both vertical and horizontal in southern Africa. These hollows range in width from approximately 20 to 120 mm. Cupules should not be confused with grinding hollows, which are wider (more than 120 mm) and shallower. Huffman (personal communication 2002) contends that large cupules [(wider than 120 mm, also known as dolly holes)] on Mapungubwe hill are postholes. Smaller cupules, however, have remained an enigma. While Taçon et. Al. (1997) assert that cupules are symbolically marking the landscape, their origin(s) and use(s) has(ve) remained largely unexplained. A combination of excavation archaeology (first author) and ethno-archaeology (second author) has uncovered a probable link between farming community rain-control and cupules on horizontal surfaces.

Historic and ethnographic accounts record a limited set of places used in rain-control by southern African farming communities. These are the graves of previous chiefs (Fourie 1921; Schapera 1930; Mönning 1978; Krige 1963), hills (Berglund 1976; Hughes 1957; Mönning 1978; Schapera 1930, 1971; Stayt 1968; R. Munyai pers. comm. 2002), caves or small rock shelters (Schapera 1971; Hughes 1957; Mönning 1978; Berglund 1978) and pools or other places of water (Berglund 1978; Hunter 1936; Thelejane 1963; Schapera 1971). Frequently these features are combined into 'ideal' rain-control places. For example in the late 1800s, Chief Lentswe, a Tswana rain-controller chief,

had his rain-enclosure in a small shelter on a hill behind his mother's homestead, and his rain-hill had a pool and a shelter (Schapera 1971).

Hilltop sites on the farms Armenia, Little Muck, Machete and Rhodes Drift in the SLCA were chosen and excavated (Fig. 1) to assess whether this association between hills and rain-control applied to the Leopard's Kopje period. These hills were selected because they are steep sided with difficult or impossible access for cattle, have insufficient space for normal homesteads, and have deposit with farming community material culture. Parallel to the excavation of these sites, ethnographic information on rain-control was collected from Venda and Pedi communities in the Limpopo Province of South Africa and Shona communities in southern Zimbabwe.

Excavations found unique material culture signatures and consequently linked the hilltop sites with rain-control. The excavations yielded Leopard's Kopje and hunter-gatherer material culture, which Schoeman (n.d.) suggested indicates complex co-operation between SLCA hunter-gatherers and farmers in rain-control. All the hills were marked with cupules, which are the focus of this paper.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND RAIN-CONTROL

Rain-control frequently has been taken out of its broader context, and early twentieth century ethnographic case studies focussed on the single 'rain-making' ceremony at the beginning of the agricultural season. These ceremonies often

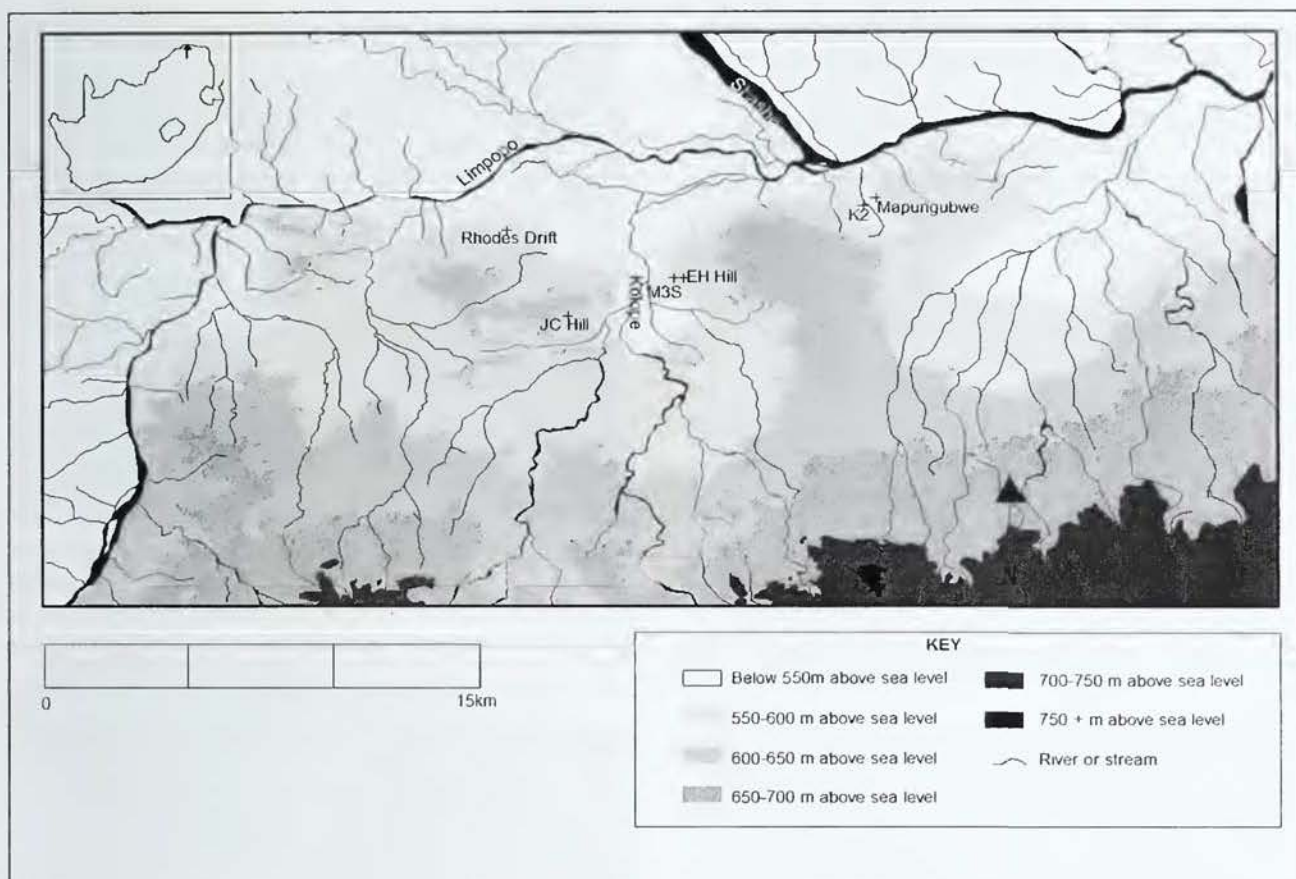


Fig. 1. Map of Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area with excavated rain-control sites indicated.

are associated with sacrifice (*cf.* Beemer 1935; Eiselen 1928; Hunter 1979). Rain-control, however, is more complex than this single ritual; rather it is a whole cycle of rituals and ceremonies performed throughout the traditional calendar. Generally, communities ask for rain towards the start of the agricultural season, celebrate and ritualise the collection of the first fruits, and after harvesting people thank the "owners of the land" (the ancestors) for the rain and the harvest (*cf.* Gelfand 1956; Stayt 1968). None of these ceremonies can be omitted. Rain-control also includes preventing hail and protecting homesteads from lightning.

This cycle of rain-control rituals and ceremonies are very important in the traditional socio-political and agro-economic life of farming communities. Therefore, it is the chief's responsibilities to co-ordinate them. The extent of control depends on how centralised his power is. The Venda people of the Limpopo Province have amongst the most centralised rain-control cycles in southern Africa. In Venda communities no person may treat drought, conduct planting (*usonda*) or harvest thanksgiving (*tevula*) ceremonies before the royal family had done so. Failure to comply could result in punitive sanctions, for example tradition recounts that in the old days, any lower chief or headman, who conducted a *tevula* ceremony before the chief, was tried for treason (Stayt 1968).

Treating Drought

Stayt (1968) recorded no annual Venda rain-control

ceremonies. If all taboos were observed, and everything was done in the proper way, the rain did not stay away (Stayt 1968). If the rain failed, oxen and money were sent to the Mwari center in Zimbabwe. If the drought continued after this, a *n'anga* was called to divine on the cause. The two most frequent causes were taboos being broken and angry ancestors. If the cause of the drought was divined to be a broken taboo, corrective steps were taken. If an ancestor was upset, he or she was identified and people were summonsed to the *tshikona* dance. This was often held within hearing distance of the offended ancestor, while the chief and his relatives visited the grave to perform the *phasa madi* ceremony. Oral traditions recalled that people used to gather at the old capital Dzata to dance the *tshikona* while the chief prayed for rain (Stayt 1968).

If the drought continued, the chief called the diviner-of-seeds (*mame vha u fungo*) to organize the ceremony to put the country right (*mudzivho*). The *mame vha u fungo* was not a rain-controller. His duty was to prepare the earth for rain. There were two ways to conduct the *mudzivho*. The first way involved children, who were given small sticks and stones rubbed in medicine. The medicine was made from crab, *fukwe* bird, meal from women's stampers and scraps of clothing. The children placed these treated items at all crossroads, rivers, drifts, boundaries, and paths that lead to the district. Simultaneously, other children poured water on the chief's ancestors' graves. This cooled their anger and showed them that their people needed water. In the second

ceremony, children were given branches dipped in magical fluid, with which they damped out all fires in the community. After this a *n'anga* lighted a fire at each petty chiefs homestead, from where women fetched fire (Stayt 1968).

If it still did not rain, the chief called a finder-of-the-rain (*maine vha mvula*). One of the *maine vha mvula*, Stayt (1968) interviewed, said that he took powdered dried crab and *fukwe* bird and mixed it with scraps of refuse cast up by the river in the last flood. He put some of this mixture on a piece of broken pot, which he in turn placed over a fire on the veranda of his house. When the fumes of this mixture began to rise, he went inside the house, where he covered himself with blankets and consequently perspired. He stayed covered the whole day. Soon the clouds appeared drawn by the fumes, and raindrops fell drawn by the sweat. Another *maine vha mvula* told Stayt (*ibid*) that he played the *phala-fhala* horn vigorously to induce perspiration, which attracted the rain.

The authors' field assistant Mr Rhudzani Munyai, grew up in Dambale Village, Venda. At Dambale Village, people combined the duties of the *maine vha u fungo* with those of the *maine vha mvula*. In times of drought, the chief instructed the people of the district to extinguish all fires on a prescribed day. The *maine vha mvula*, Mr Josias Mutundudzha, lit a new fire using fire-sticks at the chief's place. Once the rain-control was completed, all the villagers would fetch fire from the chief's fire and to re-light their own fires. On this day of exting-uishing and relighting of fires, the *maine vha mvula* in Dambale used to lead a procession into the mountains to procure rain¹. The procession consisted of the *maine vha mvula*, a group of young women in the middle and a man at the back. The young women carried palm baskets on their heads. These baskets contained raw sorghum or millet, and un-brewed beer. The food and beer was raw, as the Dambale ancestors' preferred uncooked food and drink. Once the procession reached the top of the hill the food was placed in small hollows in the rock. These hollows were probably cupules².

Tevula ceremony

At the end of the season Venda people gave thanks for the rain and the harvest in the *tevula* ceremony. The *tevula* was the most important ceremony in the Venda kingdom, and consequently was one of the most elaborate of all public functions. It was performed after the harvest and before the new farming season commences (Stayt 1968). Harvesting in the Venda kingdom took place in winter after the 'first frost' when the grains have hardened. Once harvested the crops were processed and stored. Subsequently, the Chief initiated preparations for the *tevula* ceremony.

Styat (1968) recorded that the Chief's ritual sister (*Makhadzi*) normally lead the *tevula*, unless she was out of favour with the ancestors. We, however, were told that the Chief marked the beginning of the *tevula* by inviting a *n'anga* to divine who should lead the ceremony. It, nevertheless, remained the responsibility of the *Makhadzi* or the chief's brother (*Ndumi*) to prepare for the ceremony and guide the leader. Once the leader was appointed, young (pre-pubescent) royal girls were recruited to help brew the ritual beer (*mpambo*). Only pre-puberty girls and post-menopausal sexually inactive women participated in brewing *mpambo*.

On the day of the ceremony the royal sacred site (*zwifhoni*) was set up in preparation. The *zwifhoni* is usually at the back of the *musanda* (Loubser 1991), where access is restricted to a few royal elite. The royal ceremonial regalia (*zwithungula*) were placed in a palm leaf basket (*mufaro*) ready to be carried by the ceremonial leader to the sacred site. The sacred ritual objects included a ritual axe, spear, walking stick and other weapons passed down from the royal ancestors. A ceremonial cloth (*riwenda*) was also included with the *zwithungula*. The ceremonial leader carried the *zwithungula* to the *zwifhoni*. S/he also was responsible for carrying the *mpambo*, which at this point was in wooden ritual pots or containers.

To start the ceremony, the ritual beer and the ritual objects were laid down. Next, the ceremonial leader poured *mpambo* on the *zwithungula* addressing the royal ancestors. S/he thanked the royal ancestors for a good rainy season and harvest. S/he also addressed the ancestors on issues affecting the society, and requested good rains and favourable conditions for the next farming season. The other royals took turns to pour libations and address their ancestors on different national and family issues. They also symbolically shared the *mpambo* with the ancestors by sipping it without holding the container.

After the completion of the main *tevula* ceremony at the Chief's village, petty chiefs and headmen were free to hold their own ceremonies. The core procedures at these *tevula* were similar with minor local differences. When the *tevula* ceremonies were complete, the next cycle of rituals and ceremonies associated with agricultural practices began when the chief summonsed rain specialists to conduct the rain-control rituals for the next planting season.

Tevula variations

There were regional variations, for example the Venda Tshivhase royals conducted an elaborate *tevula* during which they went to the *zwifhoni* accompanied by a cow representing the female royal ancestor (*nyatema*), and a royal bull representing the male royal ancestor (*nakhulu* Tshivhase). When it was time to drink the *mpambo* beer it first was given to the two cattle to drink. Some of the beer was poured on back of the cattle while people addressed the ancestors. In another *tevula* involving cattle the *Makhadzi* sprinkled beer on a sacred bull and cow (Stayt 1968).

During our 2002 field research in Chief Tshikunda-malema's area we documented details of another slightly different *tevula* in Dambale village. The Tshikundamalema royals used to conduct their *tevula* at a sacred rock shelter near Dambale village (Fig.2). This *zwifhoni* site is located far away from the royal village, in the mountains, as opposed to the others, which are at the back of the *musanda* area. In addition to the difference in location, there was another deviation in the Dambale *tevula* ceremony. A handful of seeds from the new harvest was collected and taken together with the *zwithungula* to the *zwifhoni* site. At the sacred cave, the seeds were placed in cupules. The *mpambo* beer was poured in the cupules as the ceremonial leader addressed the royal ancestors. This is slightly different from all other versions of *tevula* we heard about or documented: In addition to the use of cupules seeds were offered to the ancestors in addition to the *mpambo*. We visited the cave at Dambale,



Fig. 2. Photograph of the sacred shelter near Dambale village where the Tshikundamalema royals used to conduct their *thevula* ceremony.



Fig. 3. Photograph of the cupules used during the *thevula* ceremony at the Dambale shelter.



Fig. 4. Photograph of JC hill on Armenia viewed from the south.

which is no longer used for ritual purposes. The rain specialist died several years ago and had no successor. Consequently, there were no objections from the Dambale elders to our presence at the sacred site. The Dambale *zwifhoni* site is located at the base of a mountain, and an Iron Age site stretches out in front of the shelter. Unfortunately, we were not able to collect diagnostic potsherds to identify the cultural group or relatively date the former site. The shelter walls are marked with San rock art. The cupules at

the cave ranged in size from three to ten centimetres in diameter and some clustered near a shallow water collecting hollow (Fig. 3).

The location of the Dambale *zwifhoni* site is reminiscent of other Venda *midzimu* shelters, which are associated with ancient spirits (not family ancestor spirits). Gifts are left at these places and they are visited to treat misfortunes, such as female infertility. Interestingly, San rock art shelters are frequently regarded as *midzimu* places (Loubser & Dowson 1987).

ARCHAEOLOGY AND RAIN-CONTROL

Research on four SLCA rain-control hills highlighted a series of similarities between the sites. In addition to their steep sides, all were linked to caves or shelters, places of water and had been marked with cupules.

2229AC11 on Armenia (JC hill)

JC Hill (Figs 4 & 5) is a long narrow steep sided hill, aligned east-west. Access to the hilltop is through the top of a small cave on the north-western side, or up a southern, narrow crevice. Excavations found K2 ceramics and worked stone in the same stratigraphic context.

Forty-nine cupules of various sizes are scattered over the hill on exposed rock surfaces. While most are located in the hill surface rock itself, two were made in freestanding rocks or boulders. A 3.3m wide rock tank on the western end of the hilltop is surrounded by a concentration of twelve cupules. At the bottom of an adjacent rock tank are two cupules. Four cupules also are found in shallow rain catching hollows in this area (Fig. 6).

2229AD30 on Little Muck (M3S)

M3S (Figs 7 & 8) is a flat-topped, oblong steep sided hill. The deposit has been extensively damaged by rodent activity. In spite of this, we identified daga and gravel remains of at least four structures dating to the period K2-Mapungubwe period. Both K2 and K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics were present. In addition to the excavations on the main part of the hill, we excavated a rock tank (approximately 1.7 meters wide) on the southern, raised, bare rock section of the hill. It was filled intentionally, as the location of the rock tank precludes deposit washing in. This excavation yielded K2 / K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramic shards, bone, beads and two figurine fragments. Below the deposit a pecked cupule was uncovered. Next to the cupule was another concentration of peck marks. This presumably was the start of another cupule (Fig. 9).

Cupules are scattered over the hill, although they seem to concentrate along the edges. This pattern might, however, be misleading as the exposed rock surface is largely confined to the edges, with deposit covering most of the centre. Small clusters (three to four cupules) occur in wetter areas (Fig. 8). One cupule was found on a ledge in a small overhang at the eastern base of the hill.

2229AD35 on Machete (EH Hill)

EH Hill (Figs 10 & 11) is a long east-west aligned, narrow steep sided hill. The hill consists of several distinct sections: steep sided eastern section with no deposit, next a

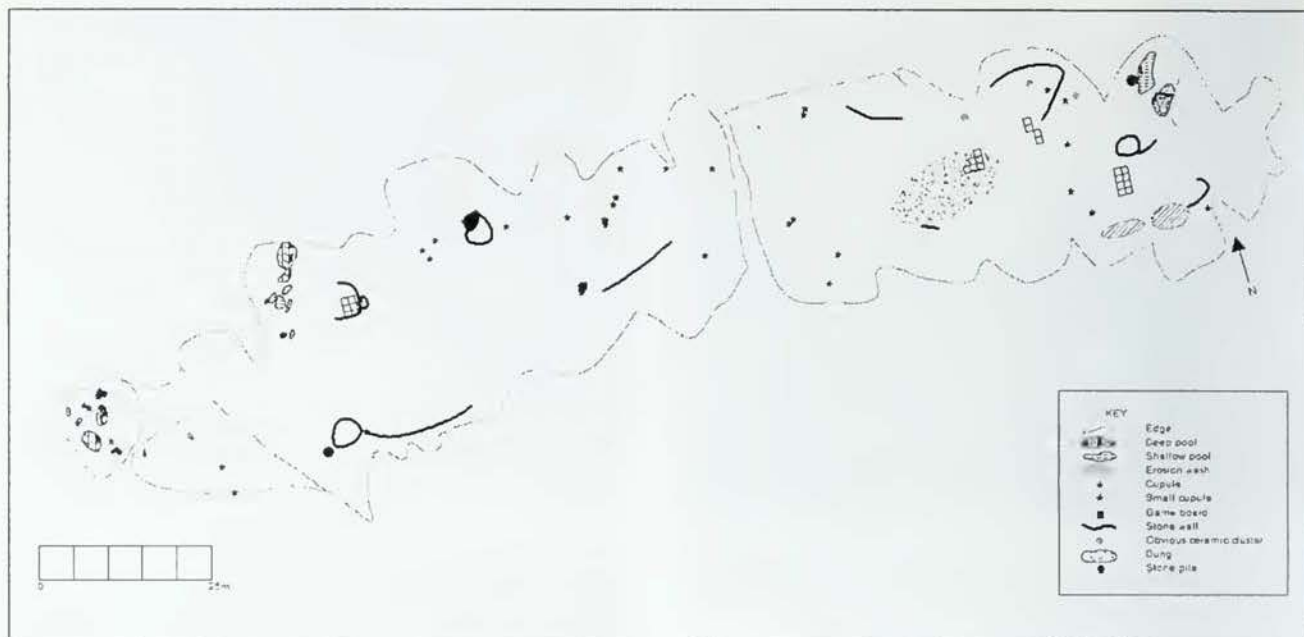


Fig. 5. Map of JC Hill, showing the distribution of cupules.



Fig. 6. Photograph of cupules in bottom of rock tank on western side of JC hill.



Fig. 7. Photograph of M3S viewed from the west.

deposit rich saddle from where the hill rises steeply to the west. A deep rock tank and six smaller pools of various sizes are located in this area. From here the hill drops down onto a flat area before rising again. Nineteen large rock tanks are located in this section. These rock tanks are above a large

shelter. The hill then gently slopes down and adjoins a small higher section with three rock tanks. Between these two areas is a wet area partly fed by the run off.

Excavation on EH Hill was confined to the saddle area. Six stratigraphic layers with gravel floors, a dung concentration and grain-bin remains were found. K2 and K2-Mapungubwe transitional ceramics dominated the assemblage, although a few Mapungubwe and Zhizo/Leokwe ceramics shards were found. A stone-tool, *Achatina* sp. shell and river pebble cache was found in DP, one of the lower levels.

Cupules are scattered over most of the hill except the lower flat rock tank cluster area, where only one small shallow cupule occurs. Most cupules (forty five) are located on the high mid section (Fig. 11). Thirteen cupules are on the eastern portion and two clusters (five and nine respectively) are located on the western side next to the wet area. One 'portable' cupule (Fig. 12) was found in the excavation.

2229AA73 on Rhodes Drift

The Rhodes Drift site is on a small domed hill, with a small shelter on the western side (Figs 13 & 14). We found the remains of two K2 grain-bins during the excavations, as well as a dung accumulation. The features do not overlap and seem to be contemporary. There are no rock tanks on the hill, but a streambed curls around two thirds of the base. Fifteen cupules are scattered over the surface, but do not cluster.

DISCUSSION

The ethnographic and historic links between hills and rain-control informed the choice to excavate SLCA hills. Excavations of these hills found material culture that did not resemble normal farmer residential remains. Rather, the sites contained a unique mixture of farmer and hunter-gatherer material culture. The material culture signature was not fixed, and changed through time manifesting a gradual disappearance of hunter-gatherer material culture (see

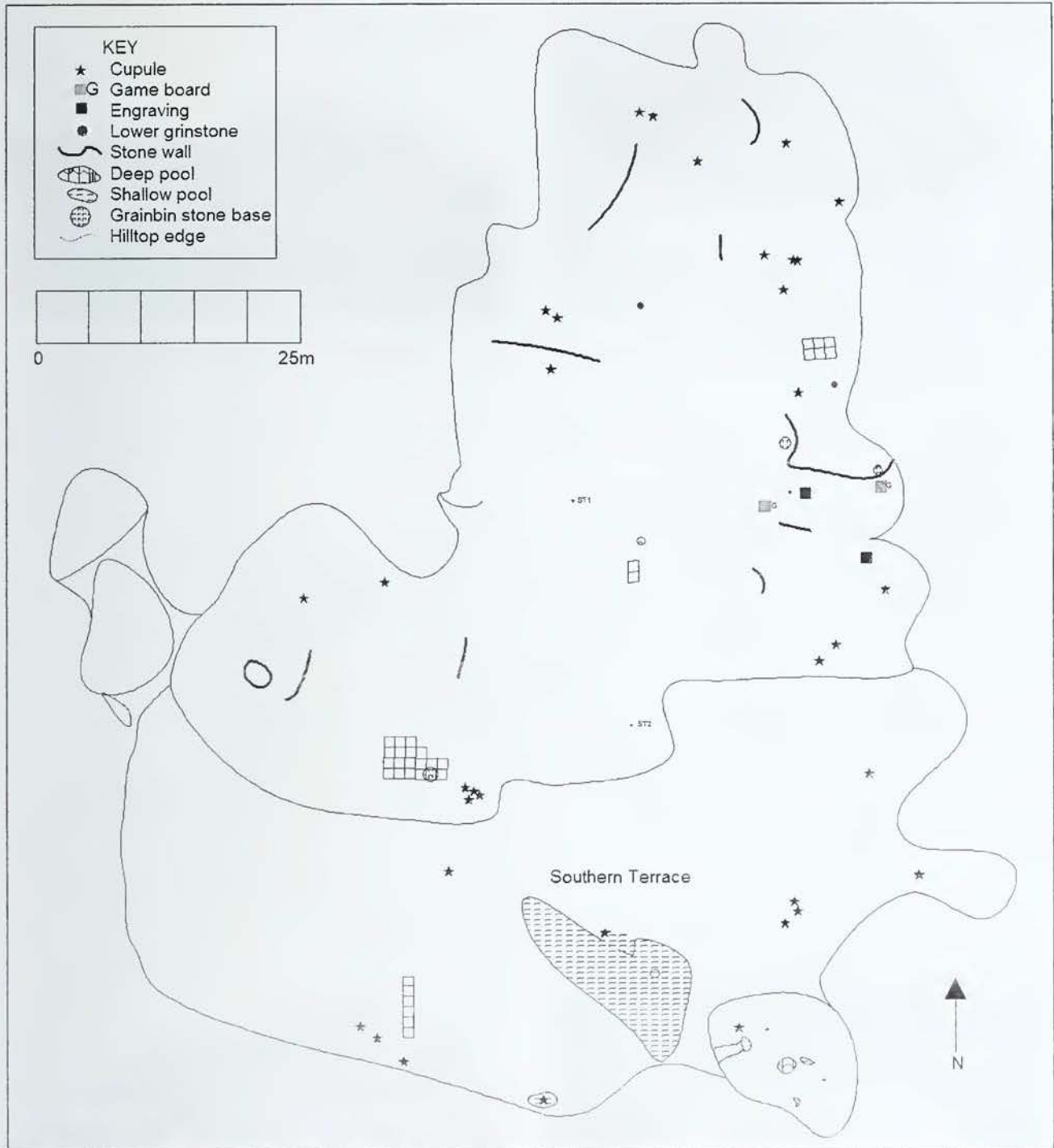


Fig. 8. Map of M3S, showing the distribution of cupules.

Schoeman *n.d.*) This, however, is not the subject of this paper, and consequently we will not elaborate here.

All the hills excavated were linked with shelters or caves, and places of water. The S.L.C.A K2 farmers' choice of hills with these topographical features is significant, because ethnographic accounts link these features with rain-control. As mentioned earlier, caves and shelters are used in rain-control. Rain-medicines are often kept in caves or shelters (see Schapera 1971; Hughes 1957; Mönning 1978; Berglund 1978). There is also an association between rain-control and places of water. This relationship seems to be widespread

through southern Africa (see Schapera 1971; Hunter 1979; Bourdillon 1991). The Shashe-Limpopo rain-controllers' selection of places to make rain thus drew on the association, prevalent throughout southern African farming communities, of hills, caves or shelters and places-of-water with rain-control.

Concentrations of cupules are found on all the hilltop sites. Excavations at M3S found evidence that link cupule production with the K2-Mapungubwe period. The M3S cupules in the rock tank had un-croded peck-marks, and were located immediately below K2/K2-Mapungubwe deposit.



Fig. 9. Photograph of pecked cupules and peck marks at the bottom of the M3 rock tank



Fig. 10. Photograph of Machete hill viewed from the north.

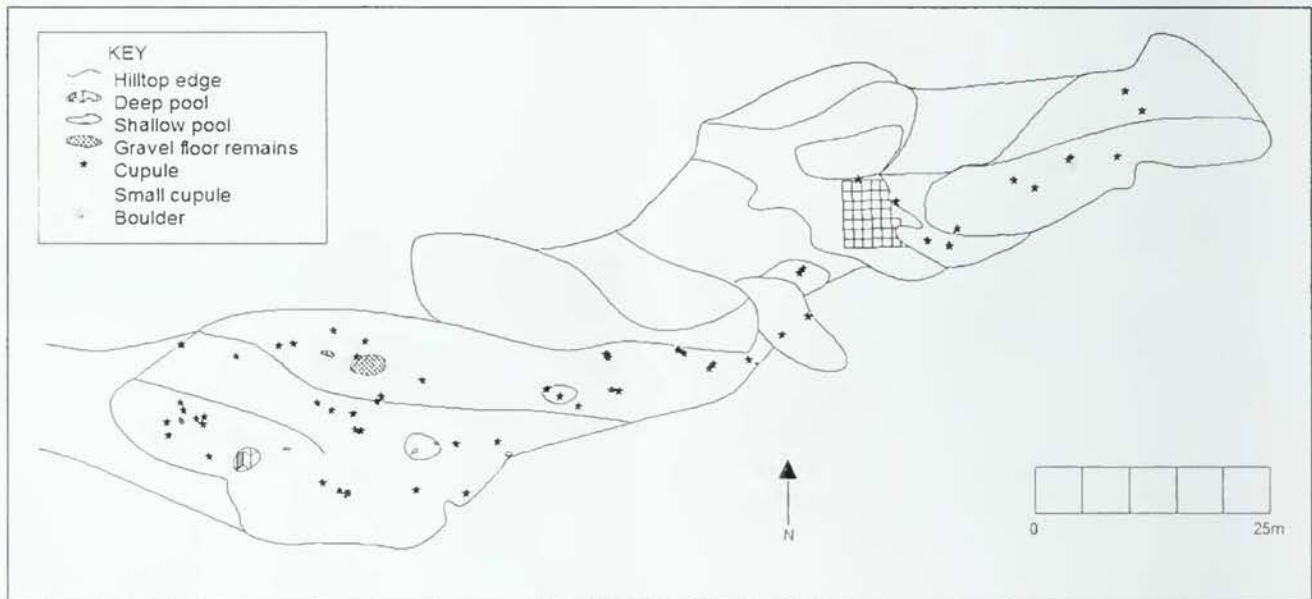


Fig. 11. Map of the eastern section of Machete hill, showing the distribution of cupules.



Fig. 12. Photograph of the 'portable' cupule found in the Machete hill excavation.



Fig. 13. Photograph of Rhodes Drift viewed from the east.

The peck-marks on open-air cupules have all eroded away. Consequently, the visibility of the peck-marks strongly suggests that the cupules were made in or immediately prior to the K2-Mapungubwe period. At this time these hills were rain-control places.

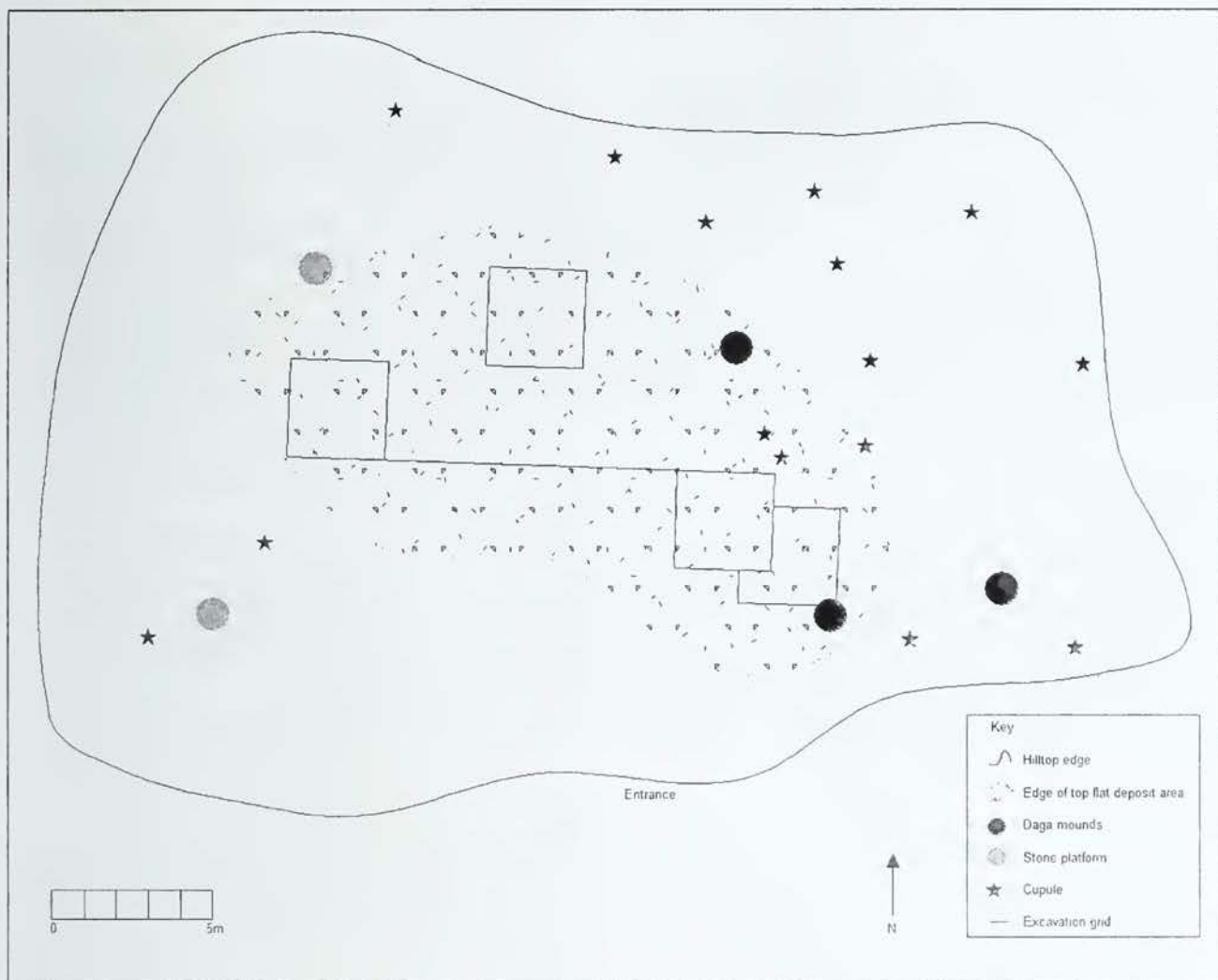


Fig. 14. Map of Rhodes Drift, showing the distribution of cupules.

On the rain-control sites cupules frequently cluster around rock tanks or areas where water gathers. In addition cupules are located at the base of rock tanks on JC Hill and M3S. This location is significant. As mentioned earlier, places-of-water are linked to rain-control, and probably informed the choice of hills for rain-control. The clustering of cupules around places-of-water suggests that cupules might be linked to rain-control. This interpretation is further supported by Venda ethnography, in which people in Chief Tshikundamalema's area used cupules to make and thank for rain. We, however, do not suggest continuity from historic Venda practices to the K2 period.

The Venda are not the only contemporary people to use cupules in rain-control. In Tsodilo Hills cupules, which were probably made during the Later Stone Age, still form part of hunter-gatherer rain-control practices (Siyaka Mnguni pers. comm.). Walker (*n.d.*) even has suggested that these cupules might even date back to the Middle Stone Age. This pre-existing link between hunter-gatherers and cupules suggest that cupules were introduced into the K2 rain-control cycle by hunter-gatherer rain-controllers. Similar localised interaction between hunter-gatherers and the ancestors of the

Dambale community might have resulted in their adoption of cupules in rain-control. There, however, are no memories of Venda interaction with hunter-gatherers (Loubser & Dowson 1987) and it is possible that cupules were incorporated in a process similar to the one in which hunter-gatherer rock art and shelters were reworked and re-interpreted in Venda ritual beliefs as part of *midzimu* material culture (cf. Loubser & Dowson 1987).

CONCLUSION

The combination of excavation and ethno-archaeology concretely links the use of cupules to the rain-control cycle in some southern African farming communities. In the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area cupules occur on large numbers on hilltops, which are associated with rain-control. On these hills they cluster around pools or other wet areas. A pecked cupule at the base of the M3S rock tank, under K2 deposit, places the start of their creation and use before or during the K2 period. Interviews with elders in Dambale indicate that the use of cupules in rain-control also took place in the recent past. This, however, does not mean that all cupules are

linked to rain-control. The origin and use of cupules, which are not on known rain-control sites, and are unsuitable for offerings to the ancestors, need to be further investigated. Additionally further ethnographic research needs to be conducted into the production and use of cupules.

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Footnotes

1. Mr Munyai did not know what happened when they reached the top of the hill. He, however, obtained this account when he interviewed Mrs Mutundudza, as Mr Josias Mutundudza, the *maine vha mvula*, passed away in the early 1990s.

2. We could not establish this definitely as Mrs Mutundudza never accompanied her husband and did not know where the hollows were located. It, however, possible that they are the Dambale shelter cupules used in the thevula.

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