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Discontinuities in hunter-gatherer prehistory in southern African drylands

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ABSTRACT

The human history of southern Africa's drylands is a history of discontinuities. This paper identifies several instances where different kinds of discontinuity seem apparent and different kinds of approaches have been, or could be, taken to address them over the past 25,000 years (the approximate time-frame of the Later Stone Age). Fundamental to all the cases examined is a basic feature of southern Africa's geography, the distinction between summer-, winter-, and year-round-rainfall regimes that cuts across the sub-continent's arid and semi-arid zones. Drawing where possible on emerging genetic and linguistic, as well as archaeological, data the paper then discusses a series of spatial and/or temporal hiatuses in the region's cultural history from the Last Glacial Maximum to the introduction of domestic livestock. It concludes by considering two further discontinuities that underlie almost all studies of Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers and herders in southern Africa, regardless of environmental location: the relatively limited degree to which an archaeological record exists for the groups whose ethnographies are most heavily consulted, and the even more troubling disconnect arising from the extension across the whole of southern Africa of ethnographic analogies drawn from a very few populations living in its dryland biomes.

1. Introduction

Both theoretically and methodologically, discontinuities in the occupation of southern African drylands have not always received sufficient attention (though for counter-examples see Deacon, 1974 for an important early study, and Mackay et al., 2014 for a more recent, late Pleistocene-focused assessment). Several factors encourage an emphasis on continuities in presence and behaviour through time and space. They include: the employment of a cultural systematics that divides the past into quite coarsely defined temporal blocks, the inner workings of which are left largely unexplored; an emphasis on defining archaeological entities by formal tools that are often so rare as to render inter-assemblage comparisons difficult and assemblage identifications uncertain; problems in dating many archaeological assemblages because appropriate organic materials may not survive in arid or actively eroding landscapes; the scarcity of deep, well-resolved rock shelter sequences in many areas, which only exacerbates the previous problem; and a continuing tendency to seek interpretations of archaeological data from a quite restricted anthropological sample. On the more positive side, several projects (e.g., Kinahan, 2001; Kinahan and Kinahan, 2006; Parkington et al., 1987; Sampson, 1985a; Vogelsang and Eichhorn, 2011) have explicitly favoured a large-scale, landscape-oriented approach, including the recovery of relevant palaeoenvironmental data, contract archaeology facilitates this in some areas (e.g. Orton, 2012), and at some open-air sites a lack of over-printing by subsequent occupations offers exceptionally good conditions for investigating questions about the social organisation of space (e.g. Parkington et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 2011). In addition, some dryland regions—notably the Karoo of South Africa, the Dâures (Brandberg) Massif and other mountainous areas of central Namibia, and Botswana's Tsodilo Hills—preserve rich archives of rock art (e.g. Campbell et al., 1994; Dowson, 1992; Kinahan, 1995 with references), including the oldest paintings in Africa (Wendt, 1976).

In this paper I present some ideas as to how archaeologists working in southern Africa can more fully explore questions of variation, dissonance, and diversity. I do so through a series of discontinuities touching on the demographic implications of major technological and climatic transitions, the introduction of pastoralism, and the limitations of the region's ethnographic record. For reasons of space, I emphasise the past 25,000 years, a span broadly

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equivalent to the Later Stone Age (LSA) of traditional nomenclature, although current drylands were certainly inhabited as early as the Acheulean (Klein, 2000) and their settlement is currently a major research focus for the succeeding Middle Stone Age (Burrough, 2016; Dewar and Stewart, 2012, 2016; Robbins et al., 2016; Vogelsang et al., 2010). Smith (1995), Lane et al. (1998), Campbell et al. (2010), Kinahan (2011), and papers in Jerardino et al. (2013) all provide more detailed overviews of individual dryland archaeologies.

2. Southern Africa and its drylands

Southern Africa is generally taken to encompass everything south of the Zambezi and Kunene Rivers. While this definition corresponds fairly well to patterning in the archaeological record (Deacon and Deacon, 1980; Mitchell, 2002), neither its internal homogeneity nor its distinctiveness should be exaggerated. For example, both the distribution of populations speaking click-using languages (Barnard, 1992) and aspects of mid-Holocene lithic assemblages (Fagan and van Noten, 1971) render attractive a more fluid boundary reaching north into Angola and Zambia. This is all the more appropriate because several dryland habitats (the Kaokoveld Desert, Namibian savanna woodlands, and Angolan mopane woodlands) extend north of the Kunene, while deep Kalahari sands reach into western Zambia, their nutrient-poor soils combining with a hot, semi-arid climate to support dry deciduous forests dominated by *Baikiaea plurijuga*.

Southern Africa's drylands are far from uniform, but at a gross level four distinct biomes can be identified (Fig. 1; Mucina and Rutherford, 2006; see also Adams et al., 1996; Cowling et al., 2004; Mendelsohn, 2002). Spanning 2000 km parallel to the Atlantic Ocean, the Desert Biome comprises rocky and gravel plains, as well as dunes and sand seas. Here in the Namib Desert, southern Africa's only truly arid region (mean annual rainfall <150 mm), rivers flow seasonally at best and vegetation is very sparse, though grasses flourish briefly after downpours. Further inland, the Nama-Karoo Biome extends across central Namibia and then south of the Orange River to encompass much of South Africa's western interior: extensive plains, interspersed with isolated hills (*kopjes*), characterise a landscape dominated by drought-tolerant grassy, dwarf shrublands supported by an annual precipitation of 100–520 mm. Westward, and reaching from !Nami≠Nūs (formerly Lüderitz) in southern Namibia to Elands Bay 200 km north of Cape Town, the drier Succulent Karoo Biome (mean annual rainfall 20–290 mm) supports many endemic succulent plants. Southern Africa's largest dryland biome, the Kalahari Savanna, covers most of Botswana and eastern Namibia, plus the north-central regions of South Africa almost to the Orange and Vaal Rivers. With only isolated pockets of topographic relief, and mostly covered by xeric grasslands interspersed with acacias and other trees, its porous, sandy soils leave it without permanent water except in the inland drainage basins of the Okavango Delta and (at times) the (potentially interlinked) Makgadikgadi, Mababe, and Ngame basins (Burrough et al., 2009).

Underpinning this variability are two basic geographical facts: the distinction between summer- and winter-rainfall regimes, and the unpredictability of precipitation in dryland environments. Encompassing much of the Fynbos Biome of the Cape and most of the South African sector of the Succulent Karoo Biome, southern Africa's southwestern corner mostly experiences precipitation in winter as cyclones repeatedly head inland from the South Atlantic. Further north, however, the frequency of winter rain diminishes in a south-west to north-east direction to the point that in southern Namibia's Diamond Area (Sperrgebiet), for example, such rain as

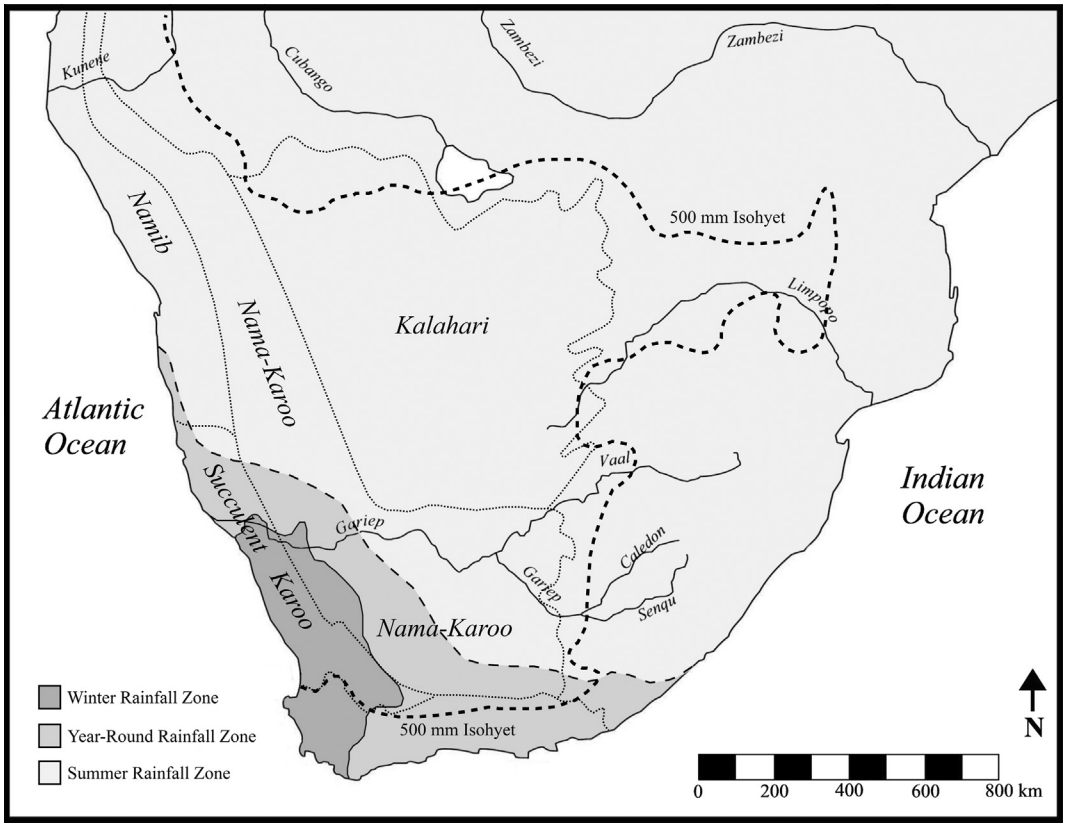

Fig. 1. Southern Africa showing the current 500 mm isohyet, the winter-, year-round and summer-rainfall zones, and dryland biomes (modified from Rutherford and Westfall, 1986).

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