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A pilot investigation into forager craft activities in the middle Limpopo Valley, southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

Forager lifeways in the middle Limpopo Valley, southern Africa, were considerably altered from 350 CE onwards when incoming farmer communities settled the region. This is seen archaeologically in a shift in the preference for specific Later Stone Age tool types and the introduction of farmer-associated items. Changes in forager behaviour have also been recorded at a number of sites from pre- to post-contact assemblages. Here we investigate Little Muck Shelter where an overwhelming emphasis on scrapers was interpreted by Hall and Smith (2000) to indicate the production of surplus goods for trade with nearby farmers. We examine the use-wear indicators of the scraper assemblage to a) establish whether it is possible to identify activity indicators in southern African Later Stone Age assemblages and b) determine whether different activities were being performed between forager camps. Hall and Smith (2000) suggest the scrapers may indicate intensive hide production and we show here that they were additionally used in other craft activities also being performed at the site. Along with Hall and Smith's (2000) work, our findings allow for two important conclusions to be made. First, it is possible to differentiate activity behaviour at Little Muck over the past 2000 years. Second, forager activity patterns as a consequence of forager-farmer interactions varied between sites and across the landscape.

1. Introduction

Over the past two millennia, southern African foragers and incoming farmer groups interacted with one another (Mitchell, 2002: Chapter 8). These interactions led to a variety of social outcomes, including labour arrangements (Guenther, 1986; Wadley, 1996), assimilation (Hall, 2000; also see Solway and Lee, 1990), and shifts in forager lifeways (Mazel, 1989; Hall, 1994). Many of these changes can be seen archaeologically, such as the appearance of farmer-associated items in forager contexts (Deacon, 1984; Hall and Smith, 2000; van Doornum, 2005), shifts in forager settlement patterns (Moore, 1985; Mazel, 1989; Sadr, 2002), and the inclusion of foragers in farmer settlement structures (Hitchcock, 1978; Wadley, 1996; Hall, 2000) and ritual practices (Dowson, 1994; Hammond-Tooke, 1998; Schoeman, 2006). While at the onset of contact forager groups occupied many parts of southern Africa, by the late second millennium AD in most areas they no longer existed or ceased practicing a traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle (e.g. Mitchell, 2002: 405–407). These interactions, therefore, had a profound effect on foragers.

Forager-farmer relations in the middle Limpopo Valley were quite different to those occurring elsewhere in southern Africa (Fig. 1). During the course of these interactions, farmer communities underwent state formation (see Huffman, 2009). This involved the gradual accumulation of wealth, control of the ritual landscape, and social stratification (Huffman, 1982, 2009; Evers and Hammond-Tooke, 1986), which in turn affected forager society. Notably, farmer-associated goods including trade wealth appeared in forager assemblages (e.g. Hall and Smith, 2000; Forssman, 2014a), indicating that they were included in distribution networks (Forssman, 2017). Their settlement structures also changed, seen in a gradual decline of forager material remains in rock shelter sites (van Doornum, 2007, 2008), such as stone and bone tools and jewellery, and its appearance in farmer contexts from *c*. 1000 CE (Forssman, 2014a; Seiler, 2017). That foragers witnessed the transformation of local society, and seem to have partaken in the farmer economy at this time, is unlike any other contact scenario across southern Africa. Understanding the intricate network of forager-farmer relations thus provides us with insights into the manner in which foragers accessed parts of the farmer economy and acquired wealth.

An important part of forager wealth acquisition was tangible and intangible forms of trade. Here we are interested in tangible trade, which we refer to as 'crafts'. Craft and craft specialization is a widely discussed topic, beginning with V. Gordon Childe in the 1930s. It is

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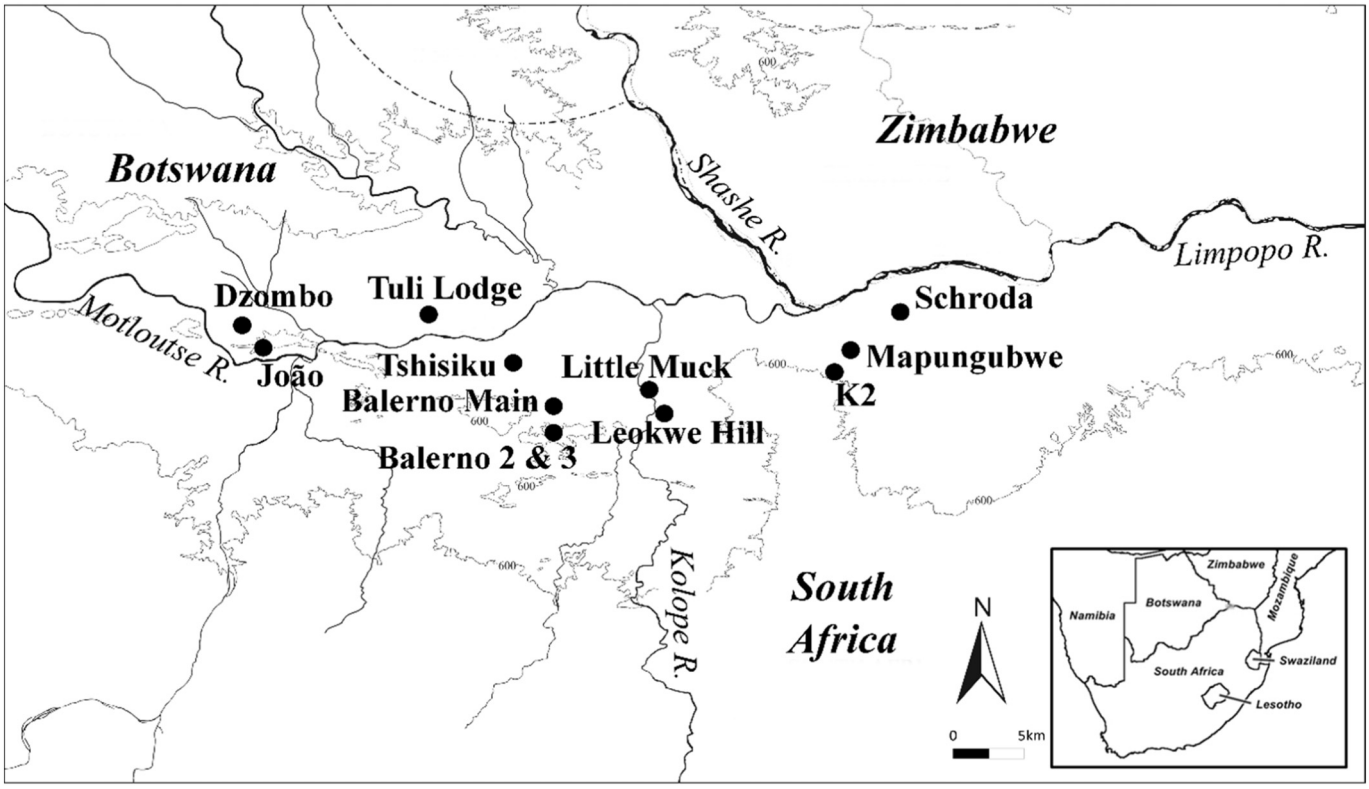

Fig. 1. The middle Limpopo valley with sites mentioned in the text and other prominent sites in the area.

understandably a challenge to reconcile (Clark 1995). Thus, we follow a fairly open-ended definition by Costin (2015: 1) who summarises 'crafts' as "a wide range of non-food, tangible, utilitarian, and prestige goods". She provides a more restrictive definition of 'craft specialization' as:

> "…a differentiated, regularized, permanent, and perhaps institutionalized production system in which producers depend on extra-household exchange relationships at least in part for their livelihood, and consumers depend on them for acquisition of goods they do not produce themselves".
>
> (Costin, 1991: 4).

Clark (1995) problematizes this definition believing it is too restrictive. One issue he raises, is the importance of scale. If viewing a single site, the archaeological record may not show a cultural anomaly, thus presenting an apparently homogenous record. Therefore, one needs to view single site findings within a broader, regional perspective in order to determine which sites contain different assemblages that may relate to craft specialization. Craft production is further defined as being part of a co-ordinated system, which may be autonomous (Stein, 1998), that accompanies a rapidly growing population (e.g. Charlton et al., 1991: 98; Beyyette, 2017: 12). These definitions have specific implications in the middle Limpopo Valley which saw a population growth among both foragers between the last centuries BC and 1000 CE (van Doornum, 2005) and farmers between at least 900 CE and 1300 (Huffman, 2005). We believe that since foragers partook in the local trade network during farmer state formation processes (Forssman, 2017), an emphasis on crafts developed during this time to accommodate an increased demand for specific items (see Forssman, 2015).

In this paper we examine the forager response to farmer contact at Little Muck Shelter by analysing the scraper assemblage to infer changes in craft production. Our aims are to a) contribute to the argument posited by Hall and Smith (2000) and provide data that demonstrates shifts in forager activities at the site and b) compare these findings to the regional sequence. Using traditional stone tool categories to infer activity is problematic because it is based on morphological traits and assumed function (e.g. Dibble, 1987). While some tools' morphology may preclude them from certain tasks, most tool types can and were used in a variety of activities (Odell, 1975). As such, determining activity differences between sites cannot be done using the appearance of tool types alone. In order to do so a use-wear analysis is required (Rots and Williamson, 2006). Here we present the results from such a study on stone scrapers recovered from Square L42 at Little Muck (Fig. 2). The backed tool assemblage was not included in this analysis being so few in number (n = 27). The results demonstrate the varied responses to farmer contact and aid in our understanding of the role forager communities played in local trade networks.

2. Little Muck Shelter

Little Muck is a multi-component site with an internal sheltered area and an outside courtyard. While both areas were occupied, the majority of the Later Stone Age material came from the shelter. The site was excavated in 1998 by a team of archaeologists from the University of the Witwatersrand headed by Simon Hall. Six 1x1m squares were excavated to varying depths, but only Square L42 has been published. All artefacts were sorted in the field and formal tools were stored separately in rigid containers. Since the tools were not collected with residue analysis in mind, it is unlikely that a focused micro-analysis will be successful, but it is not anticipated that macro-traces have been significantly altered.

The excavated deposit is composed of a series of culturally homogenous stratigraphic units identified based on colour, compaction and composition (see Fig. 2) (Hall and Smith, 2000). A lack of ceramics in the lower units, ARB 2 and GS 2 (collectively referred to as ARB 2), may suggest that it pre-dates the local appearance of farmers. While this is problematic, since it assumes foragers would have acquired ceramics as farmers arrived in the area, the levels above contain Happy Rest ceramics (500–750 CE; Huffman, 2007: 219), the first undisputed farmer-produced facies that appeared in the valley. The Happy Rest levels