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Let the Ancestors Speak: an archaeological excavation and re-evaluation of events prior and pertaining to the 1854 siege of Mugombane, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

During the 19th century the present Makapan Valley World Heritage site was a place of repeated refuge from the conflicts arising from shifting authority, acquisition and loss of power, and competition over the control of resources in the northern regions of Republic of South Africa. During 1854 growing resistance amongst the northern AmaNdebele against the frontier of colonial expansion erupted in the murder of a number of trekboers who were encroaching on their territory. Historic Cave, one of the caves in the Valley, became written into the Afrikaner Nationalist narratives of the 20th century as the place where the Boers avenged the treacherous murder of their fellow trekkers, by suppressing the savage forces of chief Mugombane and his Kekana chiefdom. The events surrounding the siege and the scale of the massacre became blurred in the playing out of these political agendas, while the Kekana oral histories remained silent on the matter.

The excavation of Historic Cave, prompted by the contradictions in the historical narrative and the silence in the oral record, provided a means to detect the boundary between what happened and what was said to have happened. This thesis presents the results of a survey of the Valley, the excavation of Historic Cave and the analysis of the remains of the siege of 1854. The archaeological survey and excavation indicates that a number of scurmishes took place in the valley, but that Historic Cave was occupied only on one occasion for any length of time, during the siege of 1854. The lime enriched deposits and dry conditions within the cave have allowed for the exceptional preservation of plant, animal and human remains. This enduring evidence chronicled the activities and steps taken by the Kekana to survive. The spatial layout of the cave together with cultural remains echo the structure and hierarchy of the society trapped within it, which like many African societies of this time comprised a heterogeneous ‘royal’ core and other ‘foreign’ subordinate groups. Evidence for divination reflects the final attempts to divine the cause of misfortune and protect the group against maleficent forces. However, it is argued that the social and religious forces that operated to keep the chiefdom together may have begun to loosen under the pressure of the siege, especially as the polluting forces of death became stronger and the group began to succumb. The remains of young and old people, and the desiccated bodies of a child and a young woman speak of untold suffering and provide a glimpse of the horror within

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the cave. From this it is reasoned that following the devastation of the siege the core of the chiefdom was challenged; the chief was ‘dealt with’ and the political power base shifted. The real reason for the ‘silence’ then lies at the point of rupture, at the stage when the surviving statesmen contrived a suitable account of ensuing events to give the new chief legitimacy and the lineage continuity.

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