

https://dspace.org/

Settlement hierarchies in the northern Transvaal: Zimbabwe ruins and Venda history

Huffman, Thomas N.; Hanisch, Edwin O.M.

1986-06
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8777

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm JUNE 1986

Title: Settlement Hierarchies in the Northern Transvaal : Zimbabwe Ruins and Venda History.

by: Thomas N Huffman & Edwin O M Hanisch

No. 191

SETTLEMENT HIERARCHIES IN THE NORTHERN TRANSVAAL :

ZIMBABWE RUINS AND VENDA HISTORY

Thomas N HUFFMAN : Head, Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand.

Edwin O.M. HANISCH : Research Associate, Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand.

-=-=-=-=-

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe Culture ruins have been recorded over a large part of southern Africa, including Venda and the northern Transvaal. These stone buildings were the political centres of Shona-speaking leaders and the products of an institutionalised bureaucracy based on divine kingship. For over 50 years Africanists have debated the relationship between these Zimbabwe ruins and the Venda, partly because Venda chiefs traditionally lived in stone-walled settlements and partly because the Venda language contains elements of both Shona and Sotho-Tswana.

According to oral tradition, the Venda nation consists of various unrelated clans that were consolidated about 250 years ago by the Singo. Although traditions concerning the origins of the Singo are vague and seldom authentic (Ralushai 1977), most agree that the Singo came from Vhukalanga, the Venda name for Zimbabwe (Stayt 1931, van Warmelo 1932, 1940). Some Africanists believe pre-Singo groups in Venda, such as the Mbedzi and Lembethu, were small and mutually autonomous before the Singo conquest and that the Singo were the first to introduce divine kingship and centralised government. Others, however, believe the Singo contribution to Venda culture has been greatly exaggerated and question whether the singo conquest occurred at all.

The settlement pattern of Zimbabwe-style ruins has a bearing on these interpretations. In 1982 we started a survey of the known ruins in the Limpopo basin to clarify their political rank and cultural meaning. We begin with some brief remarks on these two facets of settlement organisation before presenting the results of the survey and its implications for Venda prehistory.

- I -

Politics and Culture

Throughout Central and southern Africa traditional settlements of Bantu-speaking peoples invariably included a court directly associated with the leader. This leader's jurisdiction varied according to his rank and status and therefore the courts - and settlements - were ranked in a hierarchy of political importance. The highest court was the most active, necessitating the most guards, messengers, and other resident officials, and since the senior leader was the most wealthy person, he accumulated the most wives, children and other dependents. Thus, the highest court was in the largest settlement. Because the next most wealthy leaders - forming the next court level - usually lived in the next largest settlements, this political hierarchy corresponded to a hierarchy of settlement size (for a fuller discussion see Huffman 1986).

This settlement model is based on a systemic relationship between political power and the unequal distribution of wealth which is inherent in Bantu-speaking agricultural societies throughout the sub-continent. As a result, it is not limited by ethnicity, environmental resources or social organisation, but is instead potentially applicable to any Bantu-speaking society during the Iron Age.

This application of this model to the medieval Zimbabwe culture is not justifiable for this theoretical reason alone; its specific application is confirmed by 16th Portuguese eye-witness descriptions. Dos Santos (in Theal 1898-1903, Vol.7:208-209), for example, recorded the relationship between wealth, political power and the number of wives (Theal, Vol 7:271) and also the correspondence between political and settlement hierarchies.

The difficulties with applying this settlement model are not theoretical but practical. Few Zimbabwe culture sites have been firmly dated by radiocarbon or by diagnostic imports, and indigenous ceramic phases typically span at least one century. Furthermore, only a few stone walls usually remain above ground, and the total extent of most settlements is unknown. To arrange these walled areas in a hierarchy of political importance, it is necessary to know which walls directly reflect political power. Consequently, the internal organisation of the site needs to be considered, the second aim of the settlement survey.

The basic organisational principles of Zimbabwe culture settlements are known from Portuguese descriptions, Shona custom and Southern Bantu ethnography (Huffman 1981, 1986). In essence the Zimbabwe pattern reflects 'divine kingship', the ritualisation of leadership that justified the distinction between royalty and commoners. This ideology was reflected in such things as brother-sister, marriage, the institutionalised role of the king's sister, and ritual seclusion behind stone walls.

At Great Zimbabwe the principal stone walled area was the hilltop 'muzinda' or (palace) that provided ritual seclusion for the king and his sister in the front and a ritual focus for royal ancestors in the back.

The court was located in a large natural amphitheatre at the base of the king's hill, and most of the king's wives lived on the other side of the court in their own area, where a special building was located for educational functions (Huffman 1984, 1985). All these stone enclosures were protected by the houses of commoners, while other stone buildings outside this protective circle were probably occupied by nobility who were district leaders and competitors for power.

In contrast, commoner settlements away from the capitals lacked stone walling altogether, and they were organised according to another set of principles called the Bantu Cattle Pattern (Evers 1984, Huffman 1982, Kuper 1980). These two sets of different organisational principles further emphasize the social stratification that characterises the Zimbabwe culture: commoners had one pattern, royalty another.

The royal pattern has been systematically developed at only a few sites, such as Great Zimbabwe, and applied to special buildings, such as the Great Enclosure. Because of this limited application, we wanted to know more about the size and spatial variability of royal settlements, and in particular whether small centres were specific segments of the full capital pattern or complete but miniature versions of it. The answer could clarify which stone walls were a direct consequence of political power.

We turn now to the results of the survey. We present the sites in order of political level (Table 1, Figure 1), starting with the lowest.

- II -

Zimbabwe Hierarchies

Levels 1 and 2 : Family Heads and Ward Headmen

The smallest sites in the survey with Zimbabwe Tradition pottery range from .25 to 1 hectare. Since this is the size of a typical homestead throughout southern Africa, these must be the settlements of family heads and ward headmen. Most of them are in open situations and include a central mound of cattle dung, but no stone walling. These people, then, were most likely commoners.

A few other sites in this size range, however, include a modest amount of stone walling isolating a single hut. Presumably, this prestige walling marks the muzinda of royal headmen. We describe four in more detail.

The first headman's muzinda is on Toynton Farm in the Messina Game Reserve. The main hut and walls were built against large boulders (Fig.2) at the southwest end of a sandstone kopje. This hut platform was not an isolated structure: midden deposit exists behind the boulders near a back entrance, a few hut terraces extend for about 40 metres to the east edge of the kopje, and Khami-phase pottery, spindle whorls, slag and copper ore cover the area in front for about 120m to the kopje's northern edge. The elevated position of the hut platform and associated residential occupation is a feature of the royal pattern.

Another royal feature was found in a hilltop settlement on Evelyn about 22km west of Messina. Here, the main hut is isolated by a short, free-standing wall (Fig.3) decorated with a check pattern. This check design at Khami (Robinson 1959) is part of the crocodile imagery associated with leadership

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 Location of Zimbabwe culture settlements according to political level.

Fig. 2 Level 2 walling, Taynton Farm, northern Transvaal.

Fig. 3 Level 2 walling, Evelyn, northern Transvaal.

Fig. 4 Level 2 and 3 walling, Den Staat, northern Transvaal.

Fig. 5 A pair of Level 3 muzinda near the confluence of the Lotsani and Limpopo rivers, Botswana.

Fig. 6 Level 3 muzinda and initiation centre, Breslau, northern Transvaal.

Fig 7 Level 3 muzinda, Breslau, northern Transvaal.

Fig. 8 Level 3 muzinda, Verulam, northern Transvaal.

Fig. 9 Muzinda and hilltop settlement, Verulam, northern Transvaal.
Mapped by J. Loubser.

Fig. 10 Initiation enclosures at Ratho and Princenhage, northern Transvaal.

Fig. 11 Machemma Ruins, Solvent, northern Transvaal.
Redrawn with modifications from de Vaal 1943.

Fig. 12 Makahane Ruins, Kruger Park, northern Transvaal.
Modifications from a plan by W. Judson.

Fig. 13 Tshaluvhimbi, Thengwe, Venda.

Fig. 14 Dzata, Njhelele, Venda.
Redrawn with modifications from Walton 1956.

Figure 2

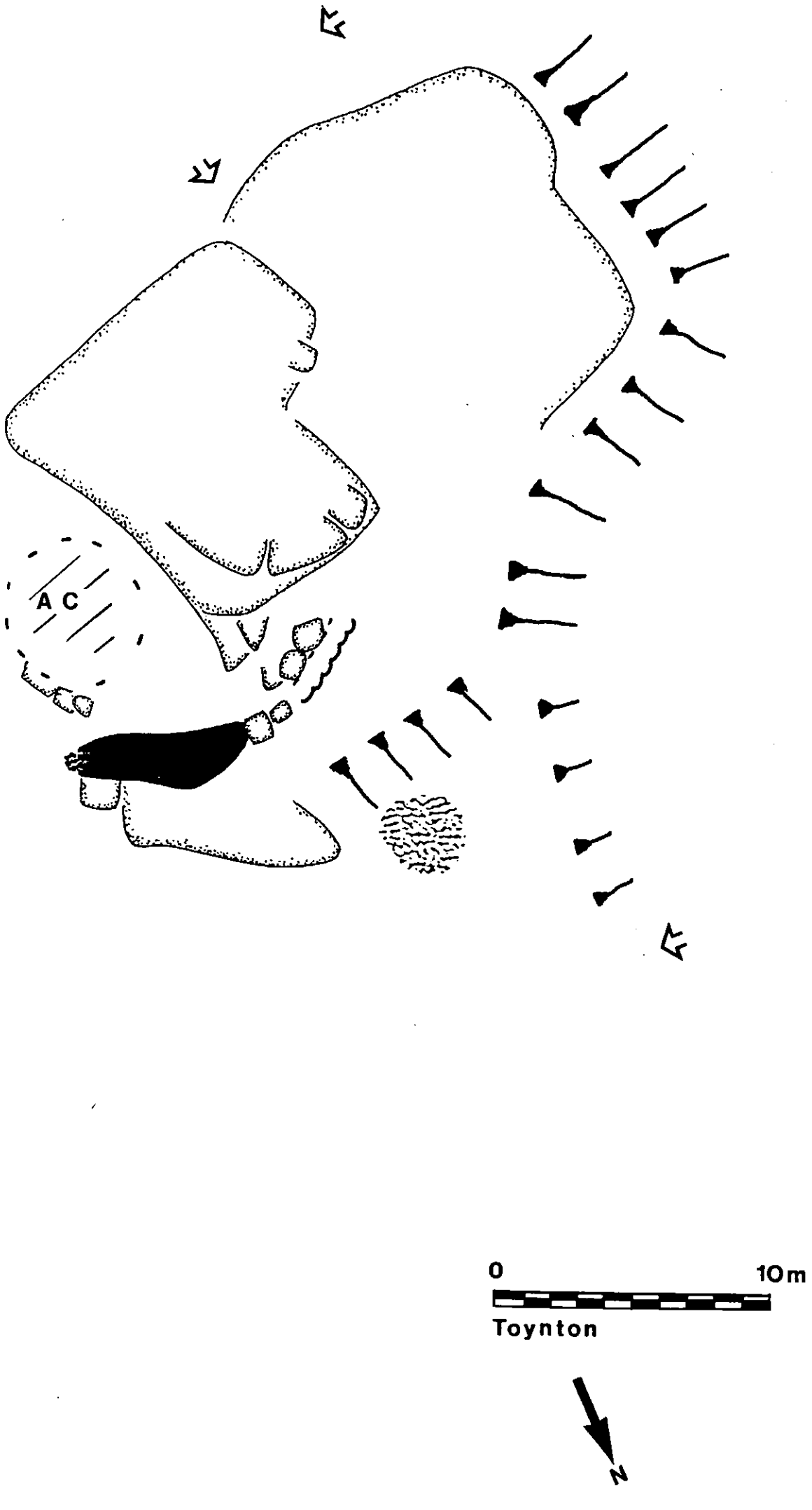
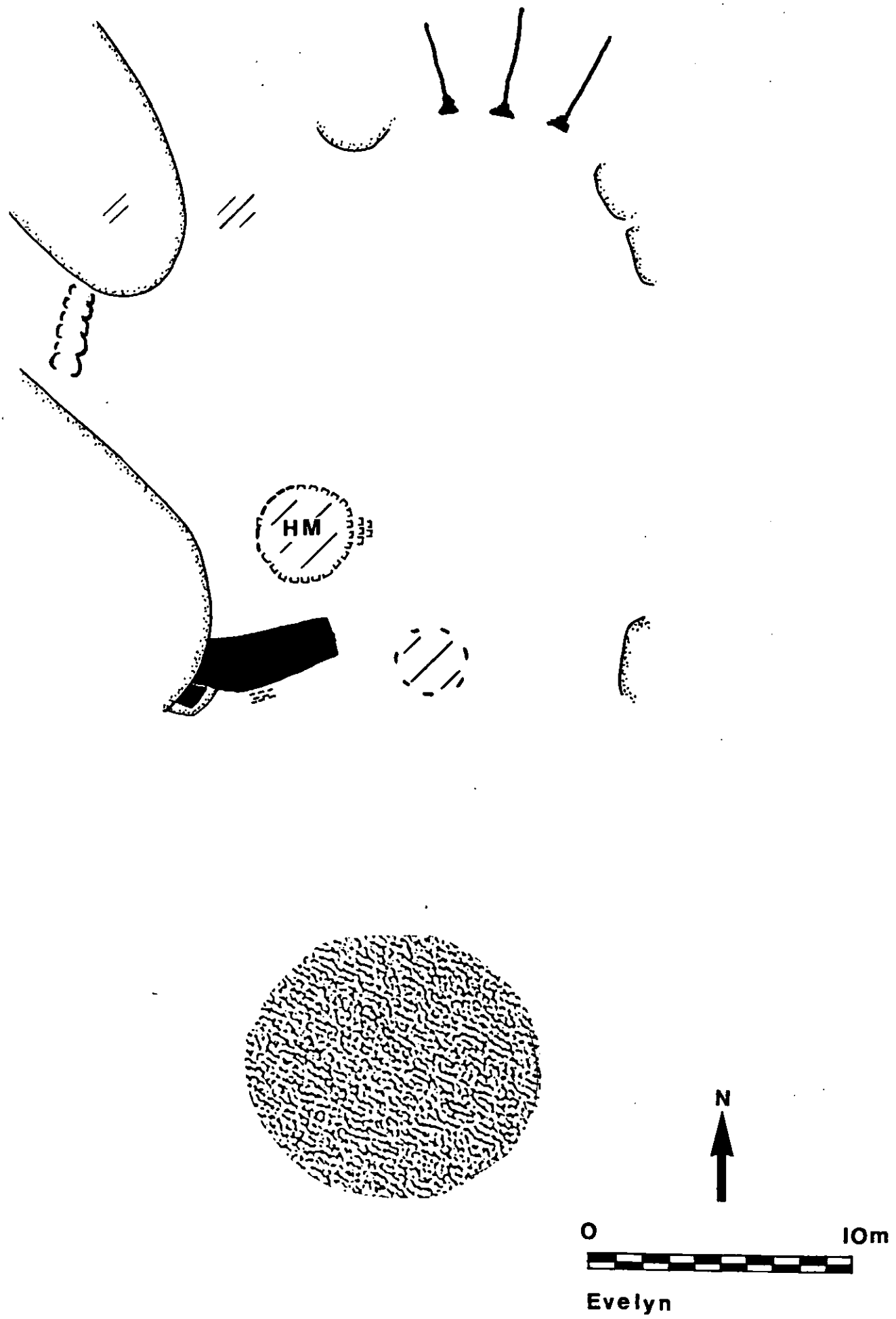


Figure 3



(Huffman 1981), and its occurance here at Evelyn is further evidence that these settlements were inhabited by royalty.

Two other royal headmen settlements are represented by the so-called 'Hottentot' isivivhane on Greefswald (Gardner 1962:). The first is on a ridge about 500m southeast of Mapungubwe Hill, and the second is 750m to the southwest near the entrance to K2, the other famous site on Greefswald. In both cases the isivivhane are hut platforms, supporting one or at most two huts, which are surrounded by hut remains with Khami-phase pottery. These two platforms were probably occupied at different times by the same line of headmen, since independent leaders of the same rank seldom live so close to each other.

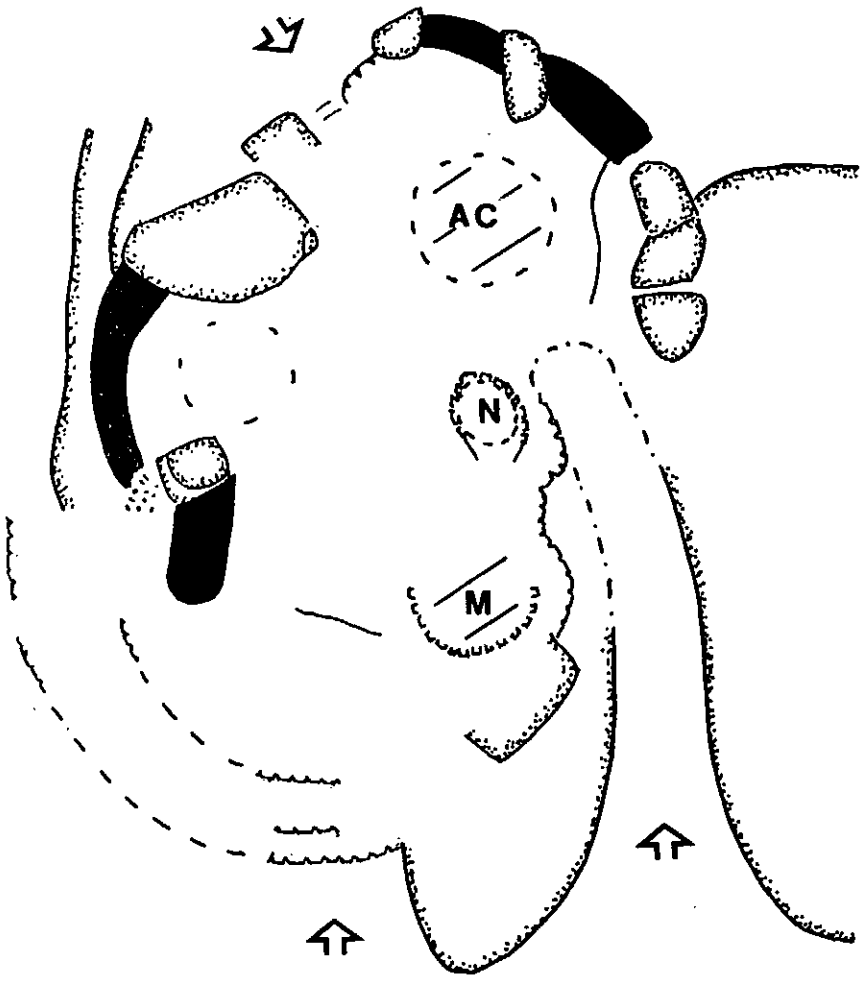
Each of these four headman level platforms was the political core of its own community. A few other similar-sized platforms, however, were found on the outskirts of larger settlements, such as Den Staat.

Den Staat, our last example, is about 12km southwest of the Shashi-Limpopo confluence, the border between Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. An outcrop 600m east of the main settlement supports a hut platform with a short length of walling (Fig.4) that demarcates the residence of someone with headman status. Cattle dung and residential debris extend in front of this platform for 75 to 100m, but the associated pottery is a mixture of K2, Mapungubwe and Khami types. The extent of the headman's settlement, therefore, is unknown, although it was much less than the main Khami period occupation to the west.

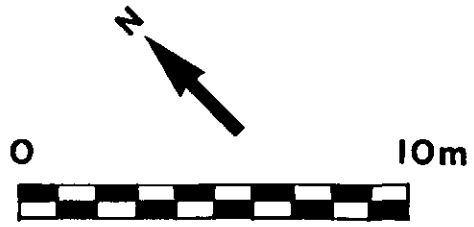
Level 3 : Petty Chiefs

The main settlement at Den Staat is one of 14 sites covering about

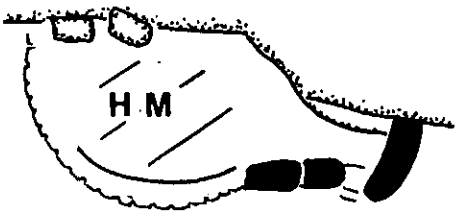
Figure 4



Main
Muzinda



Den Staat



Outer
Structure

3 hectares, which is at least two to three times larger than a royal headman's settlement. Although the survey concentrated on known sites, we feel sure this is the most common chiefly level and represents the centres of petty chiefs.

The main occupation at Den Staat centred around an artificially terraced kopje, some seven times the area of the headman's platform. A natural amphi-theatre among the rocks in front of the kopje is free of house remains and appears to have been the chief's court. A court was usually located in an area such as this where the chief could sit on a stone above the others. Furthermore, the rock itself symbolised the fair and permanent nature of the chief's decisions. Since the court belonged to the chief, it was always near his muzinda. Indeed, the word dzimbabwe in 16th century Shona meant the court and abode of a chief (de Barros in Theal 6:264).

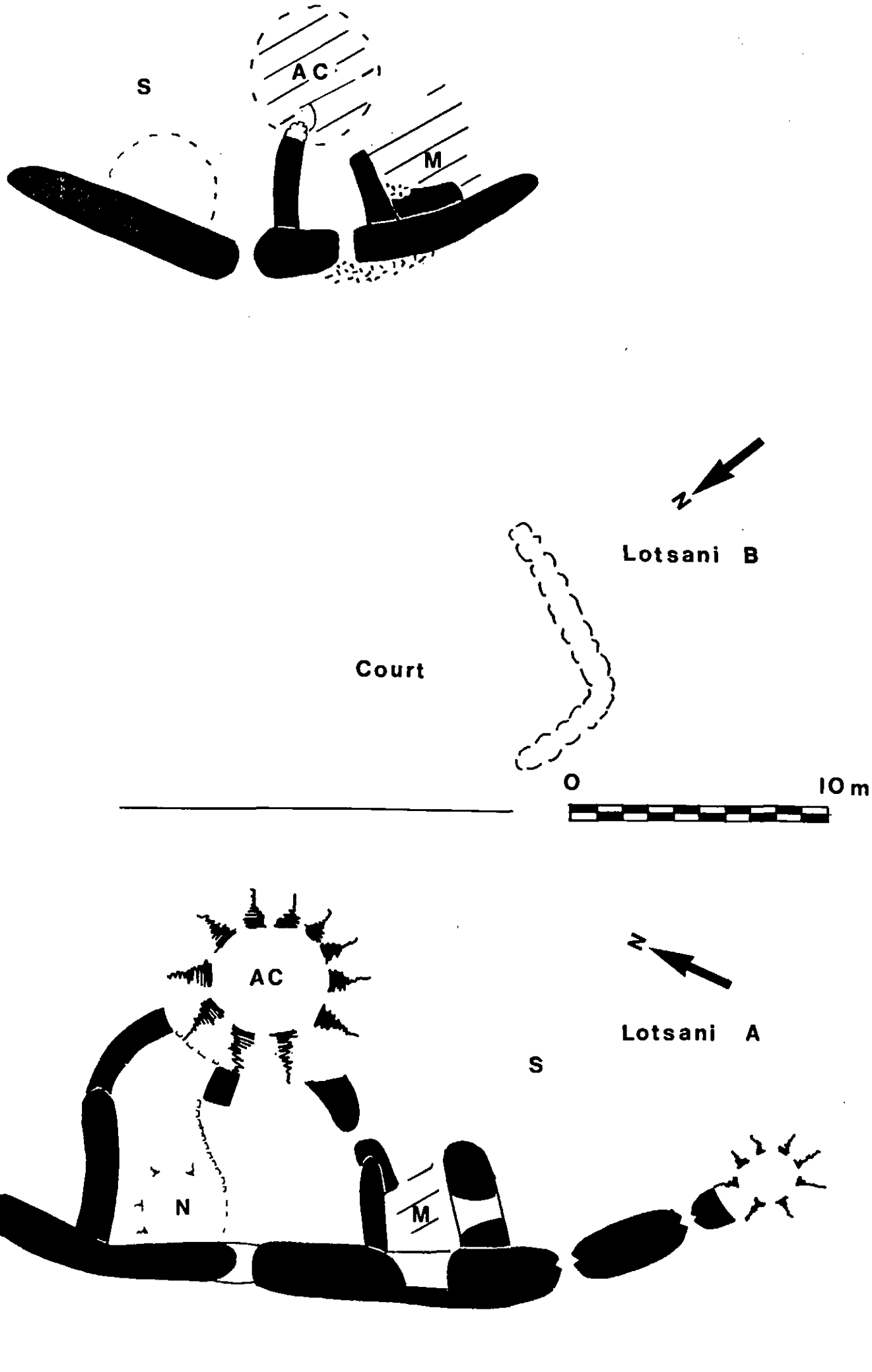
Here at Den Staat the main pathway from the court leads up to the largest hut circle on the Kopje: the size and location of this structure indicates that it was the chief's official audience chamber. A smaller hut in front of the audience chamber overlooks the court and main ascent. According to Shona custom, the chief's official messenger lived at the front of the muzinda so that he could keep the chief informed of the proceedings of the court and the requests for private audience. The particular location of this hut, therefore, identifies it as the residence of the official messenger. Besides this messenger, the chief's private witchdoctor, an nganga, typically lived in the muzinda. Among other things, this nganga protected the chief against evil people through the special powers of his craft. Ideally, a witchdoctor's hut should be small and dark to invoke an air of mystery, and for this reason the small platform next to the audience chamber can be identified as the remains of his hut.

There may have been another entrance to the muzinda that led to a fourth hut area. To understand who most likely lived here, we turn to a pair of ruins at the junction of the Limpopo and Lotsani rivers.

The Lotsani ruins were first recorded by Hall and Neal (1902). As they noted, the two ruins are only about 200m apart and appear to have been different centres of the same settlement at different times. The largest contains three doorways (Fig.5). The first doorway on the left (as one faces the wall) leads to a waiting area in front of a large mound marking the chief's audience chamber. An exposed hut on top of the front wall overlooks the waiting area inside and the bare stone of the court outside, thus identifying the hut as the residence of the chief's messenger.

The next two doorways to the right bear vertical v-shaped grooves like the side entrance to the Hill Ruin at Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 1981). The similar grooves at Great Zimbabwe are commonly said to be door jambs or slots for upright pillars. However, only one example of such a support has been found in any ruin, and Shona-speakers used haar-hung doors (Bent 1896: 259; Walton 1975), which excludes these funtional interpretations. The distribution of grooves at Great Zimbabwe and the use of v-shaped notches in Shona art (Nettleton 1984: Chapter 3.4) indicates that these grooves are

Figure 5



best interpreted as female symbols. The grooved doorways at Lotsani, therefore, designated a woman's area.

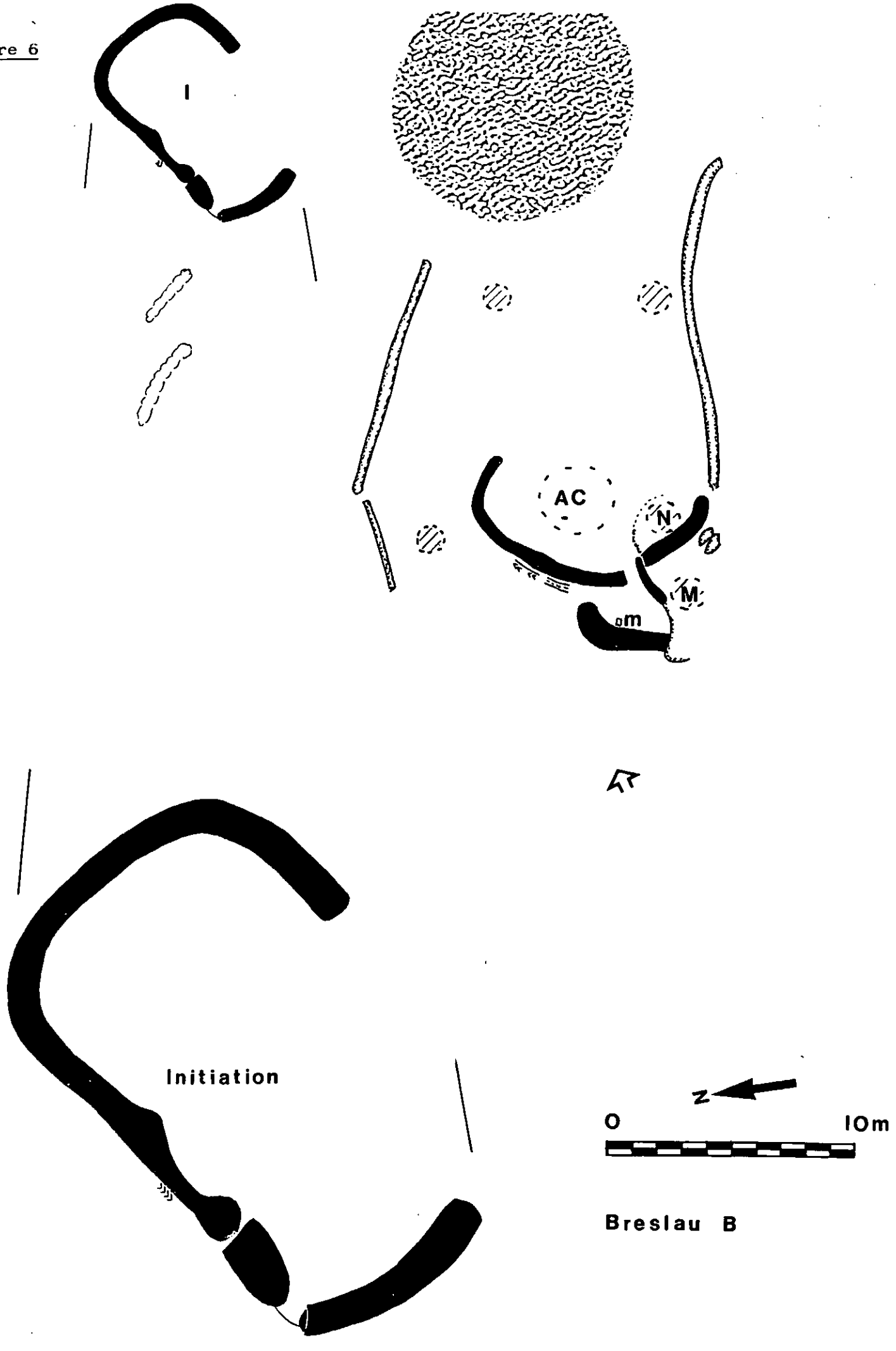
The most important woman was the 'senior sister'. When a Shona chief was installed, a brother and sister were also appointed with special responsibilities. This sister, once the sister of the previous chief died, became the senior female representative of the ruling line. Among other duties she was responsible for safeguarding the sacred charms that protected the chief from harm (Hodza and Fortune 1979:15-16). These charms were usually kept in a special grainbin near the sister, and we would expect excavations to locate such a structure in the sister's area. The importance of the chief's sister clarifies the identification of the fourth hut at Den Staat.

The other muzinda at Lotsani (Fig.5) lacks the vertical grooves, and the court messenger's hut is on the right hand side, rather than the left, but its organisational principles were clearly the same.

Other level 3 muzinda with similar shapes and organisation to the Lotsani ruins include Breslau B (Fig. 6), Faure (Fig.), Pont Drift (Fig.), Ratho (Fig.), Samaria (Fig.), Shashi/Limpopo Island (Fig.) and Weipe (Fig.). Some of these muzinda contain two doorways like the Lotsani ruins, but others have only one. The decoration at Breslau B clarifies the implications of this difference.

The front wall at Breslau B is decorated with both check and herringbone designs. A check design in this position at Khami, it will be remembered,

Figure 6



was part of the crocodile imagery associated with the king, while at both Khami and Great Zimbabwe a herringbone pattern was associated with the senior sister (Huffman 1981, in press). So the two designs together at Breslau B signified that the same doorway provided formal access to the chief and his sister. This interpretation must also apply to the decorated doorway at Verdun (Fouche 1937:Diagram 6) even though there was a second entrance at the back.

Besides this variation in doorways, these arc-shaped muzinda vary greatly in size. At Lotsani, for example, one muzinda wall was 27m long and the other nearly 50m. This difference between linked-muzinda in one settlement helps establish the limits of variation between separate level-3 muzinda when the total extent of their settlements are unknown. Only the fronts of the muzinda at Lotsani are marked by stone walls, however, and therefore, it is difficult to calculate their total size. A better guide is provided by the muzinda that are virtually complete, such as Verulam, Breslau A, Samaria and Verdun.

The front walls of the muzinda at Verulam and Breslau A (Figs. 7 & 8) are slightly more than 40m long, which is comparable to the longer wall at Lotsani, while the front portion of Verdun (Fouche 1937:Diagram 6; Walton 1956:124) is about 24m, which is similar to the smaller Lotsani ruin. Verulam and Breslau A, the largest, range from 840m^2 to 720m^2 , but Samaria at 267m^2 and Verdun at 300m^2 enclose less than half this area. Together with Den Staat (222m^2), Samaria and Verdun form the lowest end of the scale. Not only is Verdun small, its pattern is also condensed, for the court incorporated the side wall of the muzinda, as the chief's seat shows.

Figure 7

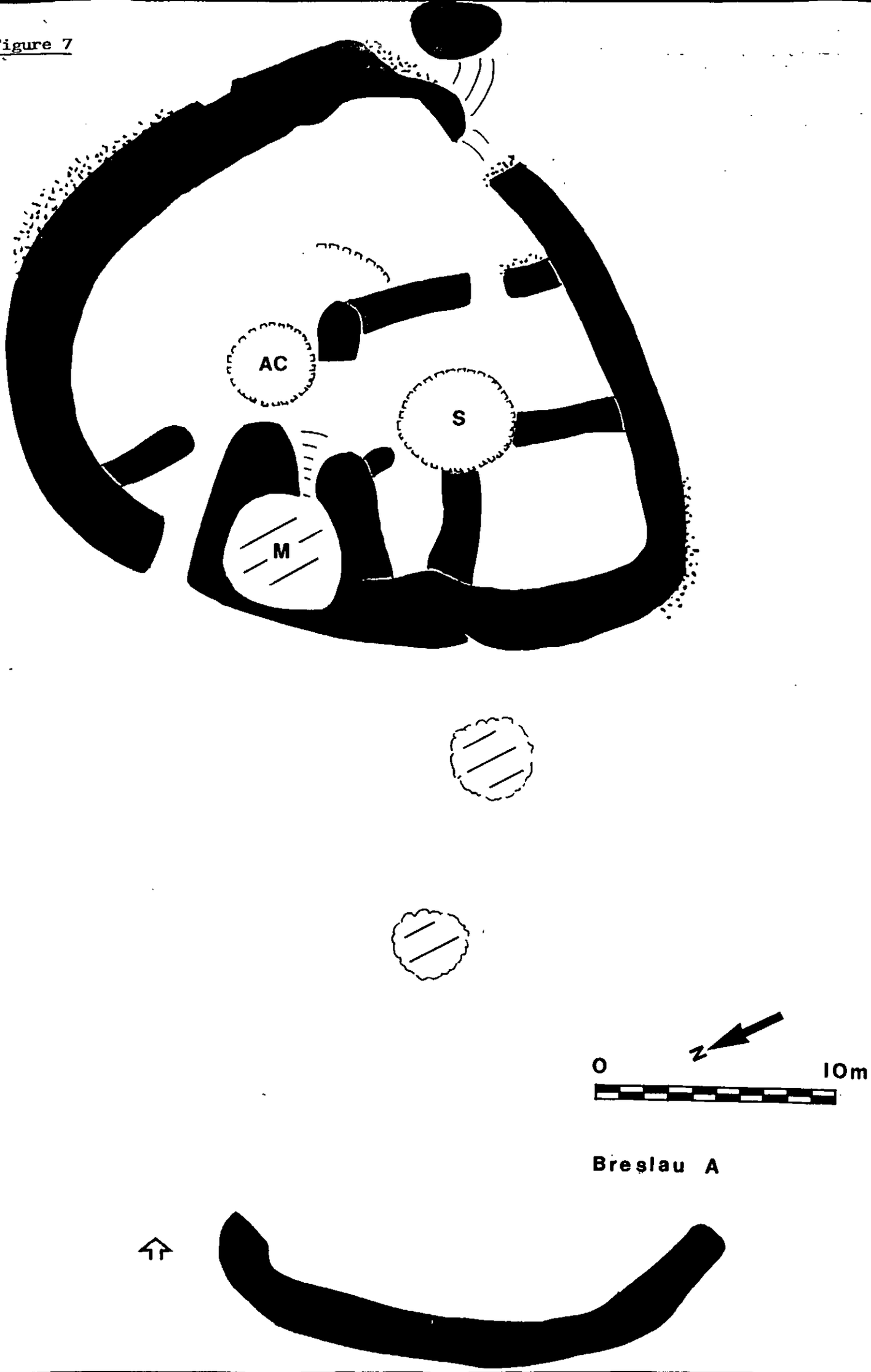
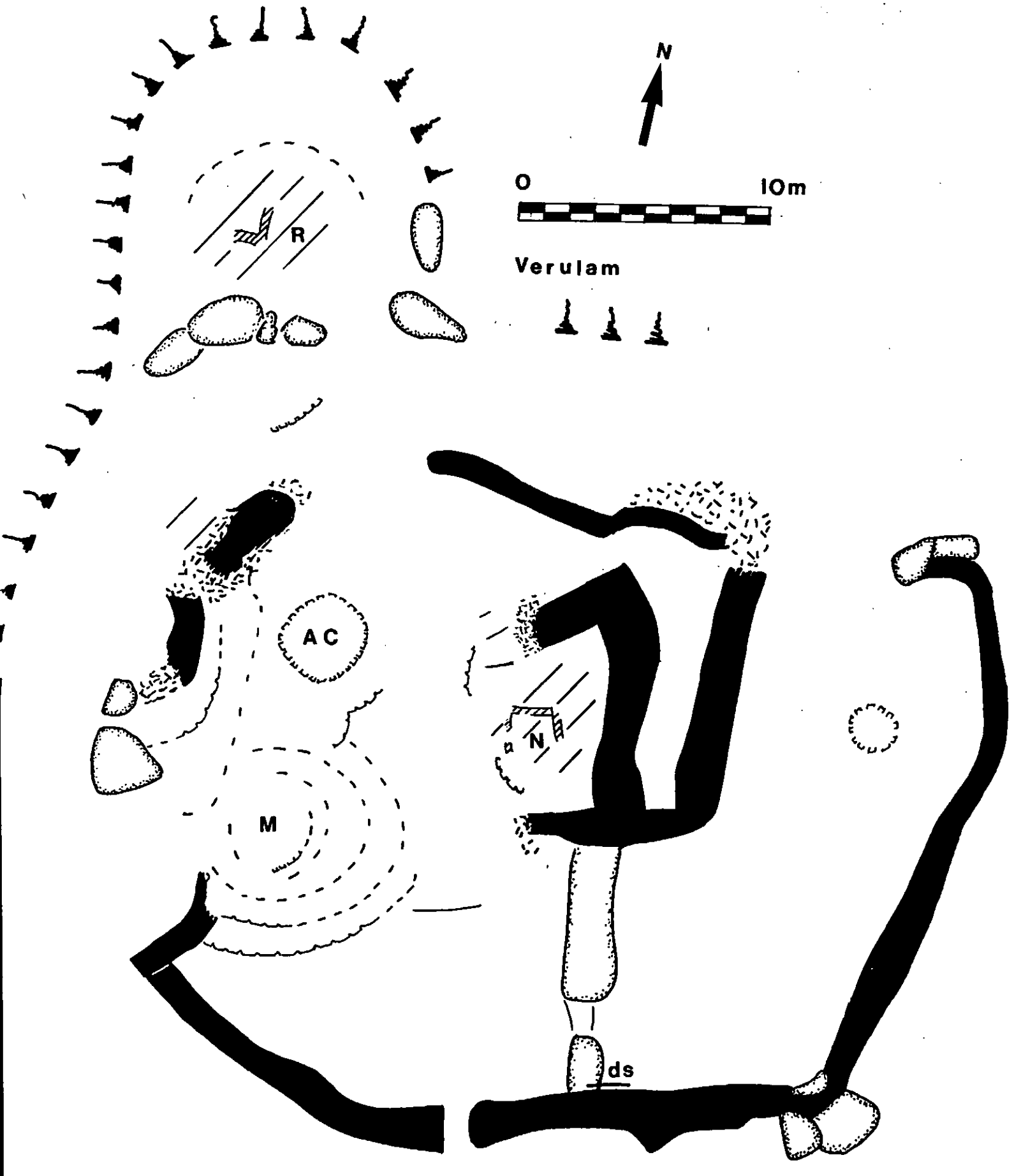


Figure 8

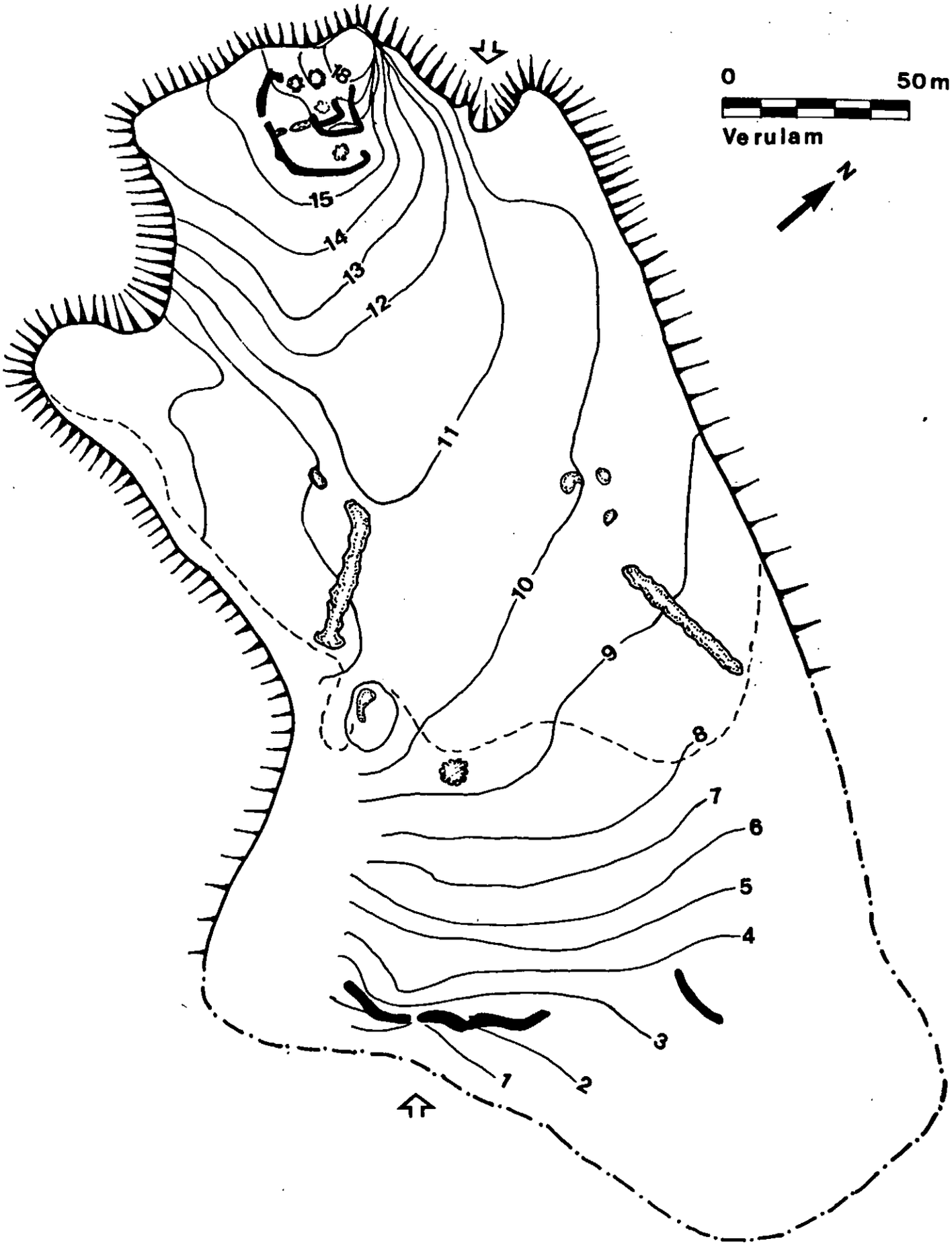


In other level-3 settlements, such as Ratho and Pont Drift, hut circles were attached to the muzinda wall. According to 16th century Portuguese descriptions (e.g. dos Santos in Theal, Vol.7:201-208), a chief's area was surrounded by a retinue of male guards, praisers and musicians as well as his kitchen staff. The size of this retinue varied with the political importance of the leader, and we would expect all of these level-3 settlements to have a similar number. At Pont Drift and Breslau A the inner circle formed by these retainers were marked off by a stone wall 30 to 40m in front of the respective muzinda, in an equivalent position to the Inner Perimeter Wall at Great Zimbabwe.

Something like the Outer Perimeter Wall at Great Zimbabwe exists at Verulam and Schroda. The muzinda at Verulam stands at the high western end of an east-west trending hill (Fig. 9). Although cattle must have been driven up the north side to kraals near the top, the lower eastern end provides the easiest route. A pathway down this side is clear of natural stone, and several metres of rough walling at the base form a prominent gateway. A similar entrance exists at Schroda (see Fouche 1937: Plate XV) about 300m away from the chief's area. Since these walls are equivalent to the Outer Perimeter Wall at Great Zimbabwe, they most likely demarcate the chief's protective circle of loyal supporters. The hilltop populations at other level-3 settlements, such as Breslau A and Breslau B, probably also served this purpose.

The populations of Breslau A and B must have been about the same, yet Breslau B includes a second building as large as its muzinda. This second building has been previously compared to the Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe and identified as the site of premarital initiations similar to the Domba school of the Venda (Huffman 1984 - See Blacking 1985 and Huffman 1985 for a debate on this hypothesis). Initiation enclosures elsewhere are invariably located on the edge of the royal wives' area below the muzinda. They

Figure 9



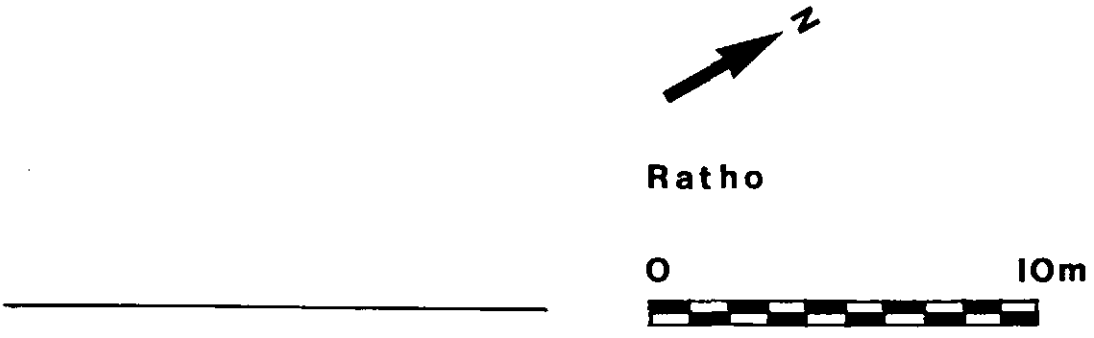
include one doorway specifically linked to the court and usually another one orientated towards the wives' area. The buildings characteristically contain unusual features such as stepped platforms, towers, cairns and wall decoration; these symbolised various aspects of society and, along with various figurines, were used as teaching aids. The initiation enclosure at Breslau was decorated with a herringbone pattern on the outside, opposite a tower-like feature near the doorway linked to the court (Fig. 6).

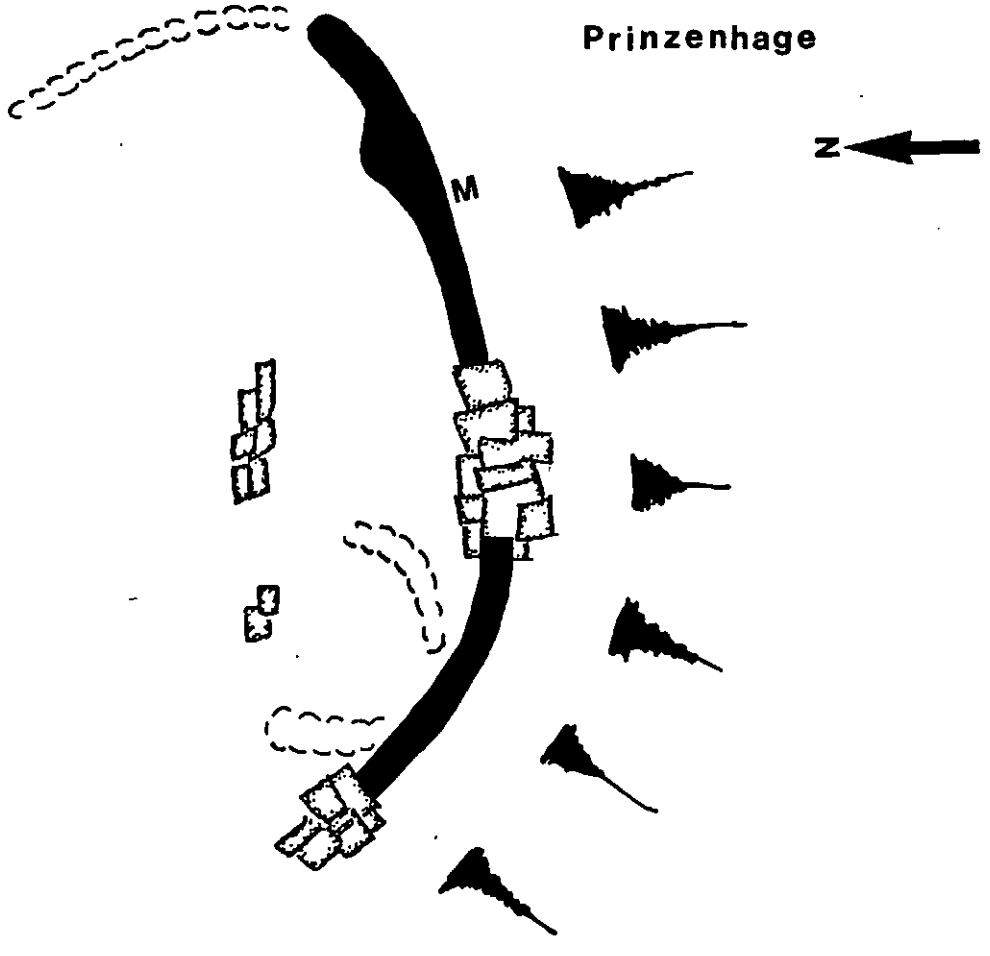
Although smaller, an initiation site was probably present at Faure (Fig.), for a small arc of wall 35m behind the muzinda was decorated on the inside with a hatched chevron design. Presumably, this small wall merely marked the location where private lessons were taught.

An initiation enclosure may have also been present at Ratho. The muzinda here stands on top of an impressive sandstone hill (Fig.) overlooking the Limpopo valley. A steep ascent from the southeast leads up past a few hut sites on the hill slope, but most people lived on the hill top, and so the only suitable area for the royal wives - and hence initiation - was behind the muzinda, in a similar situation to Faure. An enclosure made with a rubble wall in this area incorporates a rectangular stone platform made with good coursing (Fig. 10). The good coursing of the platform contrasts with the rubble wall drawing attention to the area. A monolith appears to have been stuck in the wall near the platform, and an arc of walling in front of the platform also appears to be associated. This arc-wall, monolith and platform make this area unusual, and an initiation function is feasible. An excavation for figurines and other diagnostic items, however, is necessary to strengthen this interpretation.

Figure 10







Another possibility exists on Prinzenhage Farm in the Messina Game Park. In this case the initiation building (Fig.10) consists of an arc-wall, about 20m long, enclosing a hut foundation at the west end, opposite a noticeable bulge and monolith. Besides these features, the wall backs on to the edge of a steep rocky slope, which is the reverse of what would be the case if this was a muzinda. A muzinda structure, however, is entirely missing. The most appropriate area for one was recently levelled during the construction of a road, and it is not possible to tell, without excavation, whether a muzinda existed nor, consequently, its size. The amount of occupational debris on the site, however, is not as great as the other level-3 settlements, and this site may have been the headquarters of a headman, rather than a chief.

Whatever its status, the probability of an initiation enclosure here should not be considered an anomaly, for the distribution of these schools is evidently not determined by the size of the muzinda or level of settlement. Indeed, the largest level-3 ruins in the survey lacked stone-walled initiation areas, yet these were present in the larger capitals of Great Zimbabwe, Khami and Dhlo Dhlo (Huffman 1984). One reason for this seemingly erratic distribution can be found in Venda ethnography. Venda chiefs apparently held Domba only once, at the beginning of their reign, and then they allocated the right to various headmen. Since a chief might shift his capital more than once - particularly the smaller chiefs - his first capital would have a Domba enclosure and the subsequent ones not. Consequently, initiation buildings are an indirect rather than a direct reflection of political power, and they cannot be used to calculate the level of a settlement when the total size is unknown. The best guide for this purpose remains the muzinda.

Level 4 : Senior Chiefs

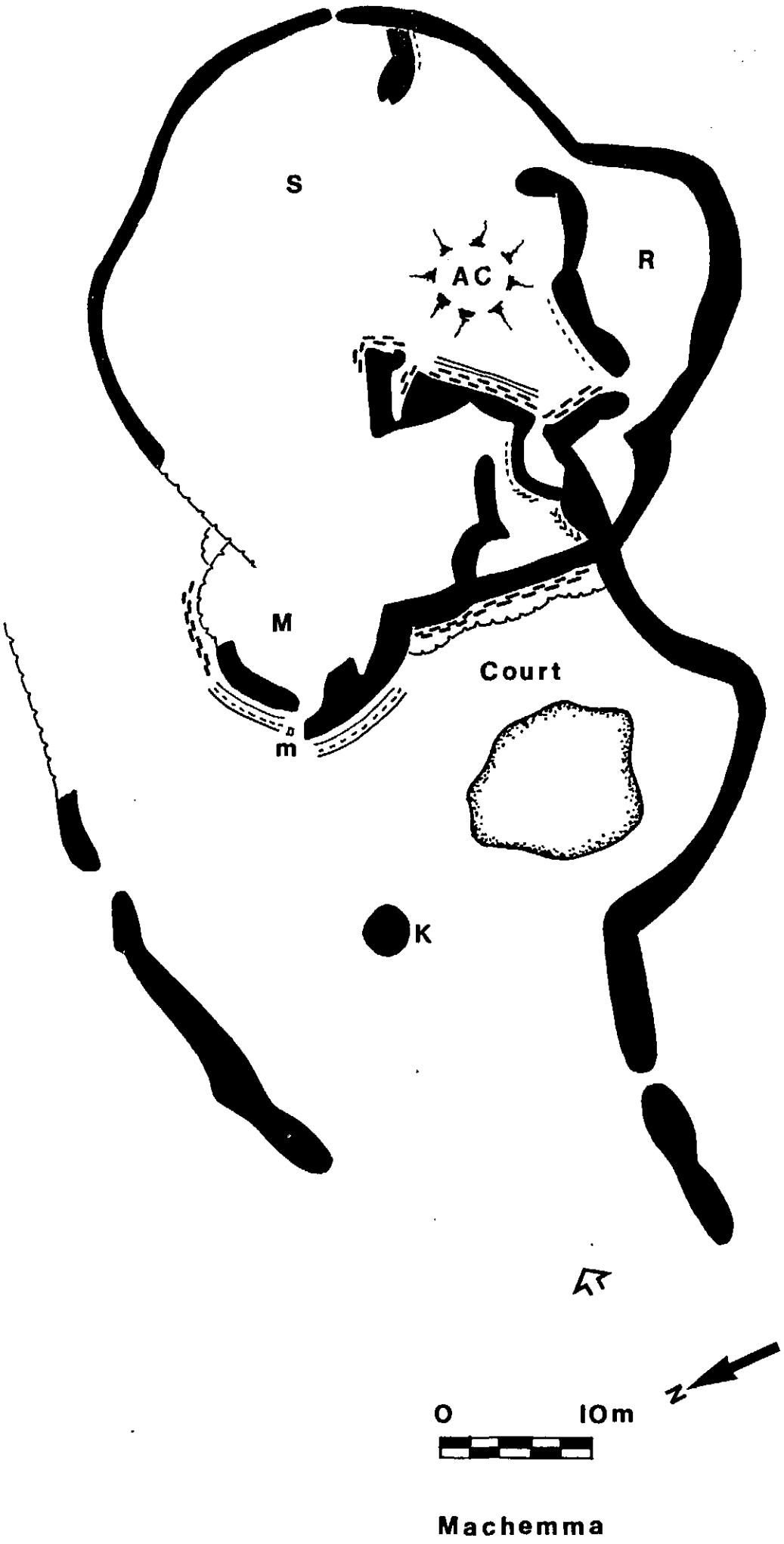
A few muzinda in the survey ranged between 1200m^2 and 2500m^2. They had large court areas, and their associated settlements, when known from residential debris, erosion scars and vegetation patterns, covered as much as 10 hectares. Since these sites are significantly larger than the previous group, they form a fourth level.

The best known level-4 site in the northern Transvaal is Machemma on the farm Solvent about 10km north of the Soutpansberg. This ruin was first excavated in 1942 by de Vaal (1943), later by Meiring from the National Museum in Bloemfontein, and then more recently by de Vaal again (pers.comm). These excavations yielded Khami band-and-panel ware, ivory, gold ornaments and imported 15th century Chinese blue-on-white porcelain, attesting to the regional importance of the chief.

The main settlement sits on top of a large massif next to a bend in the Sand River. A cleared lane on top curves around to the west end of the hill to a small stone enclosure that commands a wide vista of the surrounding plains. Such lookouts were manned by military personnel known as the 'eyes' of the chief in Shona and Venda metaphor. The stones for this lookout were quarried from a rocky outcrop immediately behind it, and this large quarry probably supplied most of the stone for the muzinda.

The east end of the cleared lane leads into a large stone-walled assembly area that contains a solid stone platform (see de Vaal 1948: Plate 3). This kind of platform, called a Khulunoni in the Venda language - that is a speaker's platform - is found wherever a large number of people assemble, especially the court. The court itself centred around a stone outcrop in the southeast corner, in front of a chief's seat like the one at Verdun (Fig.11).

Figure 11



The seat here at Machemma, however, is larger and decorated with black and white stones forming a check desing. According to Walton (1956:125) a few monoliths stood on the wall above this seat. The rest of the front wall bears a normal check design bordered with dark stones, and a dark-stone monolith was found near the main entrance (de Vaal 1948). This highly decorated wall must have been a later extension, for it abuts against another decorated wall behind it, obscuring part of a herringbone pattern.

Because of this rebuilding, the organisation of the muzinda may have changed, and, until the results of the most recent excavation are known, only a few comments can be made about the spatial arrangement of the last occupation. It is clear, however, that the organisation is the same as in the level-3 muzinda: the messenger was near the main entrance where the walls were shaped to accommodate a hut; access to the senior sister was through the opposite doorway where an abutting wall bears a vertical groove; and the large mound behind the original front wall marks the chief's official audience chamber.

A wall with check design behind this mound is similar to the check-decorated chikuva (Robinson 1959: Plate XXII; Huffman 1985), or sanctuary, at Khami, where the king prayed to this ancestor spirits for his personal welfare. The back of the building is a typically private or sacred area in the Shona organisation of space, and at Great Zimbabwe and Khami the 'national' ritual area was located behind the leader's chikuva. Here at Machemma the outer wall behind the leader's chikuva curves out to form a small enclosure, and this also appears to have been a ritual area. A more prominent ritual enclosure area can be found at Makahana.

Makahane was first investigated by Eloff and de Vaal (1965). It is located on the northern boundary of Venda and Kruger Park near where the Luvuvhu flows into the Mutale River. The core of the settlement straddles the top of an east-west trending hill covered in extensive residential deposit. The muzinda was built on top of a knoll at the eastern end. The front of this chief's area faces west, while long U-shaped walls form the back (Fig.12). This back area is in an equivalent position to the Eastern Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe, where several soapstone birds were found. In shona cosmology the east is associated with sacred activities, and this east back area can be identified as the site of rituals involving royal ancestors. According to Shona custom, areas such as these should contain at least one hut for the chief's drums and other sacred objects, a second hut for brewing ritual beer, and space for the congregation. In this case, the ritual enclosure is over 400m^2, which is as large as many level-3 muzinda. Similar sized ritual areas were recorded at most of the other level-4 settlements.

The organisation of the front of makahane followed the typical Zimbabwe patterns: a stone stairway led up to the audience chamber in the centre; the messenger's hut to the right overlooked the stairway and court below; the waiting area was to the left - incorporating in this case a prominent seat for the chief; and access to the senior sister was further to the left through the doorway bearing a pair of vertical grooves.

Figure 12



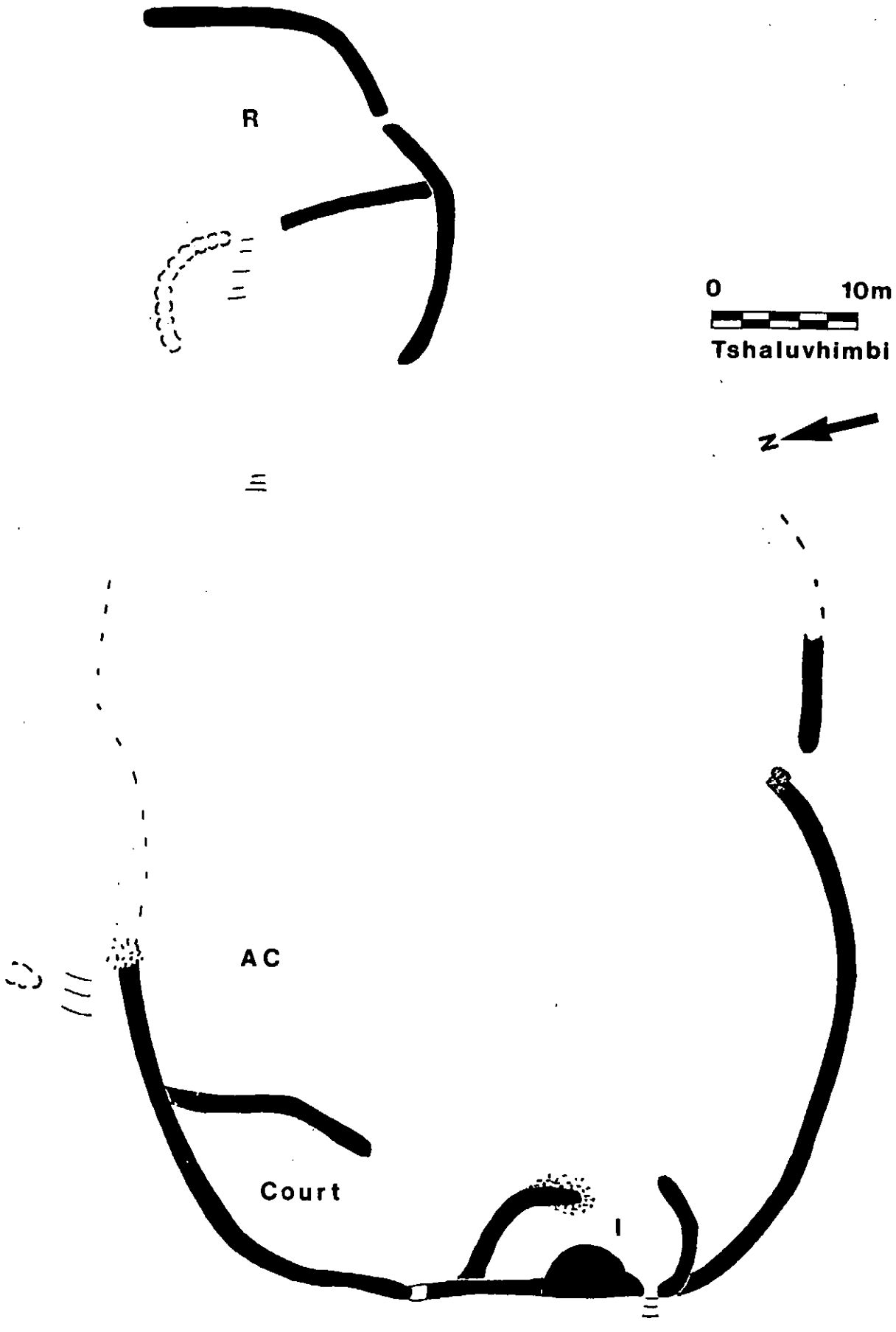
Other walling occurs near the muzinda. A small arc of walling was built on the rocky ridge opposite the sister's entrance. Because the walls enclose the foundations of one hut and some grain bins, this was probably the residence of the chief's first wife, the person in charge of the produce from his zunde fields. These fields were cultivated by the chief's subjects as a form of tribute in labour, and the food was used for communal purposes, such as refreshment for visitors (Bullock 1927; Holleman 1952). Several suitable field areas exist below the hill along the banks of the Luvuvhu River. Vegetation disturbances show that similar field areas existed near most of the sites in the survey.

The Makahane ruin is associated traditionally with the Nyai branch of the Lembethu, a Venda group who occupied this area before the Singo conquest (Eloff and de Vaal 1965). Two other ruins farther up the Mutali River near Sibasa are associated with other pre-Singo people.

Tshilavulu and Tshingoni were first recorded by Ralushai and Grey (1977). According to Ralushai (pers.comm.,1985), the ruins are more correctly known as Tshaluvhimbi (the place of Vhimbi) and Tshitaka tsha Makoleni (grove in the clouds) rather than the names of the mountains on which they sit.

Tshaluvhimbi is the largest of the two muzinda. The back area includes a multiroomed ritual area, and the front incorporates the court and a small enclosure with a stone platform typical of initiation centres (Fig.13). Tshitaka tsha Makoleni is heavily overgrown, and therefore we did not map it in detail, but even a sketch (Fig.) indicates that it follows the Zimbabwe pattern: the main path - now deeply eroded - led into a stone-walled court that was attached to the muzinda; and the multiroomed ritual area was on the opposite

Figure 13



side at the back. Furthermore, the style of walling shows that these were Zimbabwe ruins rather than a more recent Venda settlement.

Although Tshaluvhimbi is now inside a Thavhatahsindi area, it is known as one of the ancestral capitals (or musanda in the Venda language) of the Mbedzi. Both Tshaluvhimbi and Tshitaka tsha Makoleni, along with the Maneledzi pool in the Mutale River, form a sacred circuit of the Thevhula ritual. Thevhula is an annual thanksgiving ceremony conducted by the chief and his sister at the graves of their ancestors, and the two ruins figure prominently because of their historical importance.

Two other level-4 ruins are known west of here in the Kwevho area above the Nzhelele Valley. A pair of muzinda on the slopes of Tshamilora Hill are spaced about 150m apart, similar to the level-3 Lotsani ruins. Both muzinda have the same layout, but the court walls of one were made in a rougher style than the chief's area behind. One court incorporates a seat, and they both contain blocked doorways - a feature still found today in Venda. As part of the installation of a chief, the old entrance to the court is closed and a new one opened through the front wall (see eg.Stayt 1931). These alterations, then, show that both muzinda had been occupied for a number of years by more that one chief, and it makes sense to find initiation enclosures next to each court.

Some Venda call this settlement Dzata Makadzi, or Dzata Tshiendeulu, and claim that it was an early capital of the Singo rather than the Kwevho (NeTshiendeulu, pers.comm.1984) because the celebrated Singo ruler Ndyambeu was supposed to have died in a cave on Tshiendeulu Hill a few kilometres away (van Warmelo 1940). For reasons given later we doubt this claim, but whatever the case, there is no doubt about the traditional location of the main Singo capital.

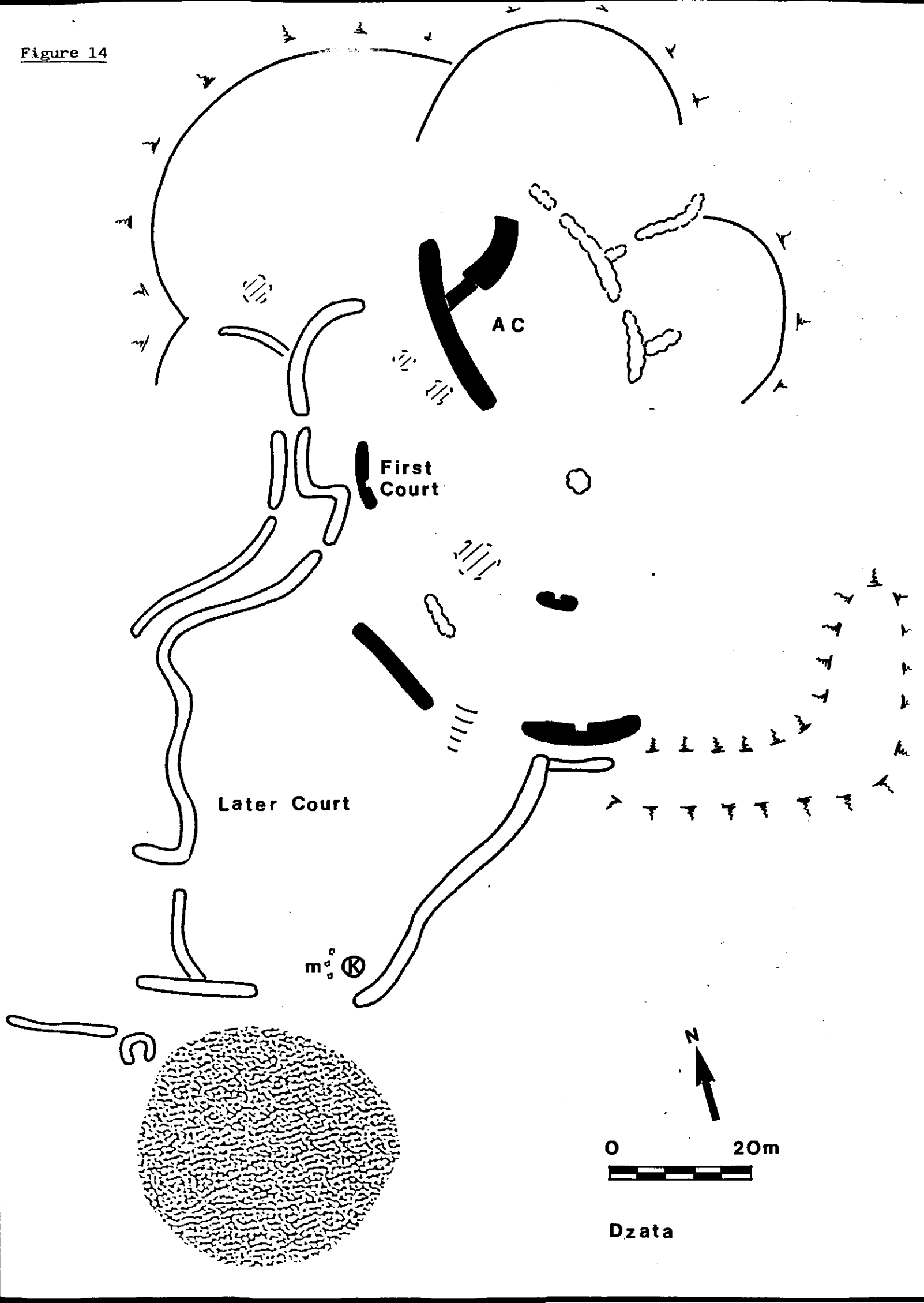
Level 5 : Paramount Chiefs

Dzata in the Nzhelele Valley is the recognised capital of the Singo when Venda was united under a single ruler. Because of its historical importance, this site is now a national shrine and, as a result, has been somewhat altered. Despite these alterations, it is clear that the residential area covered some 50 hectares, and the muzinda was over 4500m^2, making it the largest in the survey and the only level-5 settlement known south of the Limpopo.

According to some oral traditions, Dzata experienced more than one construction phase. In the famous Ngoma-Lungundu account of Mudau, the town grew during the reign of Dimbanyika, the fourth king at Dzata, after he had finished consolidating Venda (van Warmelo 1940:30). In Dzivhani's list of chiefs Masindi is credited with rebuilding Dzata after Dimbanyika (alias Ndyambeu) died mysteriously in Tshiendeule Hill (van Warmelo 1940:37). Despite these discrepancies, these traditions indicate that the town grew as the Singo expanded their authority.

This growth is also apparent in the architecture of the settlement, for old plans and photos (eg Fouche 1937: Plate XIII, 5&6; van Warmelo 1932: Plate 3; Walton 1956: Plates 40&53) indicate that the muzinda complex was built in different styles of walling. Venda style walls (round boulders and angular rocks set on edge) enclose a large open area in the south that must have been the main court (Fig. 14). The location of this court and its public entrance, marked by a khulunoni, establish a south-north orientation to the muzinda. Zimbabwe style walls at the north end shield the most likely place for the chief's audience chamber, but this walling is orientated west-east, like many of the other muzinda in the survey.

Figure 14



A chief's seat in a rough Zimbabwe wall west of the audience chamber may therefore mark the location of an earlier court. If this was so, then the area of the initial muzinda was between 1700 and 2000m^2, the size associated with a level-4 chief. Two other Zimbabwe walls between the courts are also supposed to have had chiefs' seat (Schofield in Fouche 1937:45), and they may represent a series of shifting courts or, alternatively, waiting areas such as the one at Makahanye. In contrast to other muzinda in the survey, however, the walls at Dzata were built with blue stones. This small point, along with the changes in orientation and size, becomes significant when we consider Venda oral tradition in more detail.

- III -

Venda History and Iron Age Hierarchies

Oral traditions throughout Venda agree on at least two points: the Singo conquered a number of independent clans; and during the time of Thoho ya Ndou, Dzata was abandoned and the nation fragmented into independent chiefdoms. This historical sequence is reflected in the settlement hierarchy, for the capitals of the major pre-Singo groups, such as the Mbedzi, and Lembethu, were about the same size, indicating equal political authority, while the Singo capital of Dzata was the only paramount chief's settlement in Venda. In historic times, level five groups such as the Ngwato, Swazi and Zulu each controlled an area of about 30 000km^2, (Huffman 1986). Because there is a positive correlation between the number of levels and the size of a polity, Dzata must have also been the centre of a large nation. Thus, the settlement survey helps confirm the traditionally remembered Singo conquest.

The time of this conquest is a disputed point. Some Africanists date

it to the beginning of the 18th century (eg Lestrade 1927, Liesegang 1977), and others place it in the later half of that period (eg Beach 1980:260), depending on their ethnic identification of the Thovhela kingdom. The settlement data combined with documentary evidence about Thovhela settles this debate. In 1730, the Dutch in Delagoa Bay interviewed an African called Mahumane about his travels to the kingdom of Thovhela a few years earlier (Liesegang 1977). Mahumane's account makes it clear that Venda was consolidated by then, and so Datza, the only level-5 settlement anywhere in the region must have been inhabited at that time.

Here is part of Mahumane's answer to a question about Thovhela's capital:-

> As to the special name of the settlement of Inthowelle (which as he says is wholly built with dark blue stones - the residences as well as a kind of wall which encloses the whole) he knows no other answer than that if members of the local population were about to go there, he heard them say: we go to Insatti. The place where the chief sits is raised and also made from the mentioned kind of stone and is called Palamma by the local inhabitants.

Mahumane's reference to blue stones confirms the identification of Dzata with Thovhela's capital, and this in turn demonstrates that the Singo conquest occurred during the first quarter of the 18th century. A more precise date for the beginning of the conquest and the construction of Dzata is provided by the royal genealogy of the Singo.

The early ancestors of the Singo include such legendary figures as Ndyambeu and Mambo (van Warmelo 1932: 6). Since these names occur elsewhere only among the changamire Rozwi (Beach 1980:261), there seems little reason

to doubt a close ethnic connection. We know from Portuguese sources (eg. Conceicao in Beach 1980) that a major Rozwi expansion occurred in the 1680s and 1690s under Changamire Dombolakonachingwango. After this man's death in 1696, his sons fought each other over the chieftainship (Beach 1980:232). It makes sense, then, that the Rozwi-related Singo moved across the Limpopo sometime during this period of Rozwi activity. It follows that the initial level-4 settlement at Dzata most likely relates to a relatively short period between the arrival of the Singo and their establishment of a state. (For this reason we believe the long term occupation of the Tshamilora ruins predate the Singo and that it was a Kwevho settlement).

Even though the Singo united Venda for the first time, they were not the first to establish centralised government. The Lembethu and Mbedzi capitals of Makahane and Tshaluvhimbi, for example, were the settlements of senior chiefs equal in authority to Singo capitals after the breakup of Dzata. In fact, the Lembethu and Mbedzi may have been comparable to the Singo when the Singo first arrived, judging by the size of the initial muzinda at Dzata.

Besides centralisation, the earlier muzinda of the Lembethu and Mbedzi also demonstrate that the essence of Venda culture - an institutionalised bureaucracy supported by divine kingship - was widespread in the Soutpansberg before the Singo conquest. This culture was introduced at the latest in the 15th century, the general date of the muzinda with imported porcelain and Khami phase pottery. Now, the distribution of ceramic styles, among other things, reflects the distribution of language groups if the makers and users of the style are the same. When this qualification is met, Khami phase pottery reflects the distribution of Shona speakers, and another

style, generally called Moloko, can be associated with Sotho-Tswana speakers (Schofield 1948). Venda pottery, on the other hand, is a recognised amalgamation of Shona and Sotho-Tswana styles, reflecting the merger of these two languages into Venda. New radiocarbon dates for Venda pottery in the Phalaborwa area show that this merger had occurred by the beginning of the 16th century (Evers, pers.comm.). Clearly, then, Venda language and culture were firmly established well before the arrival of the Singo. It follows that the Singo were not the 'original' or 'real' Venda as many Africanists used to believe.

This widely held opinion was based at least in part on the mistaken premise that politically autonomous groups must also be culturally distinct. Rather than this heterogenous portrayal the survey demonstrates that the Singo had essentially the same cosmology as the people they conquered.