

Chapter One

Learning from the Dead

Archaeology and archaeology's interaction with human remains are rapidly changing. When I began work on this project, the disinterment of human remains from the Green Point burial grounds in Cape Town was leading to heated debates. Archaeologists were portrayed as grave robbers. The excavations were likened by some to apartheid-era forced removals (Weeder 2004:23). Archaeology as a discipline was portrayed as a continuation of white supremacist disregard for the history and, literal, remains of indigenous communities (it must be said, in contradiction to all the facts). Archaeology was embattled, reacting to social and political forces it did not understand and with which it was not engaged.

Now, as I finalize the text of this thesis, 143 skeletons from Mapungubwe, K2 and surrounding sites in the Limpopo Valley, excavated by a variety of people since the 1930s, have been re-interred in conditions designed to preserve the remains. The process leading to the re-interment, however, was very different from that characterizing the Green Point exhumations. Archaeologists have engaged with the wider community, government at several levels and the many local communities claiming the remains. The process of re-interment was negotiated and agreed by all parties; archaeology was neither side-lined by popular politics nor made the pariah. Indeed, the Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, went so far as to state that

By accepting the claims for human remains, these institutions [archaeology and anatomy departments holding the skeletons] have shown a huge commitment towards our common goal of addressing the injustices of our shared past whilst promoting healing within our communities and reconciliation between previously conflicting parties (Mabudafhasi 2007, parenthesis added).

Whilst the Deputy Minister's sentiments are quite different from the equation of the activity of archaeologists with apartheid forced removals, there is no doubt still much to be done in the development of policy on the excavation, research and curation of human remains.

Changes in the field of Stone Age archaeology have been less rapid and less dramatic than developments in handling archaeological human remains. Nevertheless, changes are afoot. A number of senior archaeologists have recently called for reforms in the theory, method and practice of Later Stone Age archaeology (Humphreys 2004/2005, 2007; Mitchell 2005a, 2005b). In the following chapter I discuss some of the points they made. I take forward some of their suggestions and make some of my own in this thesis. Later Stone Age archaeology is an extremely exciting field that deserves the benefit of continuing theoretical and methodological innovation.

Hunter-gatherer history in southern Africa

Archaeologists often cite the long time depth available to them as one of the areas of research (and expertise) in which they can make a great (and unique) contribution to social studies. The specific implications of this time depth are, though, rarely followed-up in any explicit sort of way. Yet time depth *is* an area of great interest where archaeologists can make an important contribution. What, then, are the implications, and how can they be incorporated into a research programme?

All societies draw on the 'history' of their community in the development, negotiation, contestation and maintenance of their social and political structures. Both the Green Point and Limpopo Valley cases are good examples of this in contemporary society. Therefore to fully (or even partially) understand some of the social processes at a given time in a society, researchers need to have some knowledge of what preceded it. In many instances this information is, to a greater

or lesser extent, available to archaeologists. It is precisely this information that is compiled when constructing sequences through time. In Later Stone Age archaeology an older emphasis on purely technological sequence and change is giving way to progressively more interest in sequences of social change.

To pursue this interest in social change researchers need to ask which elements of society changed, and which remained the same. The specificities of the change are likely to be informative about which social actors and which types of relationships led to the change. Archaeologists are in a unique position to see how material culture was implicated in social relations and negotiations. If such projects are linked to particular social and cognitive models, detailed understandings of past societies may emerge.

This issue of social change came to the fore in southern Africa in the mid-1980s in Later Stone Age archaeology. It was led by the Revisionist critique of Kalahari San ethnography. I discuss the debate and its implications in the following chapter. Many of the anthropological debates about Kalahari ethnographies were based on a political economy model. In much of the subsequent research in Stone Age archaeology that emphasized hunter-gatherer 'history', ideas of political economy were transformed into ones of historical materialism or Marxism. 'History', then, came to have very specific connotations within a Marxist-materialist theoretical discourse. Like the earlier work that it sought to overthrow, it emphasized the technological and economic base of society: infrastructure at the expense of superstructure.

Over the ensuing decades, these earlier attempts at writing hunter-gatherer history have been debated and contested, particularly in light of newer theoretical trends. The most productive area of research, following the Revisionist lead, has been the study of recent change in hunter-gatherer societies in contact with other economic groups. The study of 'contact period' Later Stone Age rock art in the south-eastern mountains is a good example: functionalist studies (Vinnicombe 1976) gave way to Marxist analyses (Campbell 1986, 1987) which in turn were

challenged by structurationist arguments (Dowson 1994, 1995, 1998, 2000). Most recently, Geoffrey Blundell (2004) has worked within a broadly post-colonial framework and emphasized body theory. Excavational archaeology has tended to be slower in following new theoretical trends.

Whilst the continued refinement of arguments about the history of hunter-gatherers over the last two thousand years of contact with other economic groups is indeed admirable, change in hunter-gatherer society prior to contact with other economic groups has received substantially less attention. No doubt it lacks the political cachet of studying colonial oppression. A major theme in this thesis is the study of changes in pre-contact hunter-gatherer societies in southern Africa. Such a study cannot be simply a chronological list of differences uncovered in the archaeology. It needs to go beyond that and discuss the social processes involved in the changing communities.

I take as the empirical basis of my study a rich body of data that has received surprisingly little attention: human graves. Graves do not provide information on only physical aspects of human populations. They are also a rich resource for understanding social and cultural practices. As such, they are ideal for researching social, cultural and, indeed, religious aspects of the past. They cannot, of course, be taken in isolation, but must be studied within the broad sweep of knowledge available on the communities that produced them.

The Later Stone Age burials I study are from the southern Cape coastal belt and adjacent interior of South Africa between the Gourits River in the west and the Great Fish River in the east. Most therefore come from within the borders of the Eastern Cape Province, although a few fall within the Western Cape Province. The reason I choose this area is that many burials are known from it, as opposed to the relatively low numbers known from the rest of southern Africa. Also, graves there contained large numbers of grave goods of diverse classes. Important too is the apparent similarity in location, structure and content of graves in the

area (Chapter 4). All of these traits are regionally specific; they hint at unique social processes in the region.

The boundaries I set for the area in which I work are arbitrary. No doubt, burials that are in some ways similar to the southern Cape ones continue to the east and particularly the west of the area in which I work. It is not possible to draw an exact line between different (for want of a better term) 'culture areas'. Indeed, the idea of distinct, isolated, culturally homogenous areas is an outdated one; there is much interaction and continuity between areas. The histories of these adjacent areas almost certainly have some similarities to the southern Cape area I study, but equally certainly they will have regionally specific differences.

Because the focus of my study is on change in pre-contact hunter-gatherer societies, I have not considered burials younger than 2 000 BP. After that time a number of groups of people, having different economies, moved into the broad region and interacted with the pre-existing hunter-gatherers. I have not imposed any upper age limit on the material I studied, but practically I have not found any burials dated to older than 10 000 BP.

Considerations when using burial data

Ever since the earliest days of archaeology, researchers have been excavating and studying human burials. Yet their treatment is still one of the most emotive and contentious areas of archaeological activity. The empirical subject of this thesis is human burial practice during the Later Stone Age in the southern Cape of South Africa. Because of the sensitivities surrounding the subject, I begin with a discussion of the issues one needs to consider when studying human physical remains. In this section I shall discuss three relevant and cross-cutting topics: the law, the scientific value of studying human remains and the ethics involved. A balance is needed between these three topics when planning and executing a project of this sort.

I make no pretence of resolving any of the tricky issues involved in the study of human burials. Rather, I highlight what I believe are some of the crucial issues before stating the position I adopt in this thesis. I hope it is clear from what follows that I have no malicious or mal-intent in conducting this study. Unavoidably, I work within my own cultural framework, although I make every effort to be sensitive to the views of others, even if these views are at odds to my own. I ask that others similarly respect my views in these matters.

Ethical issues, similar to these, have recently been discussed in the context of human skeletons collected from the recently dead at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (Avery 2000; Legassick & Rassool 2000; Morris 2000; Morris & Jacobson 2000; Ouzman 2000; Rassool 2001; Iziko 2005). Whilst these discussions are undoubtedly important, most of the discussion is not directly relevant to this study because this study relates to archaeological material older than two thousand years: no direct links with any living group could possibly be demonstrated.

From an archaeological perspective, graves and their contents (human bones, grave goods and grave furniture) cannot be considered any different from any other class of archaeological material: they are material objects which, when recovered from good contexts and studied using appropriate techniques, can provide information on the human past. From the materialist perspective that archaeology compels us to adopt, human bones are no more than conglomerates of bone apatite and collagen. They have no mystical or 'spiritual' properties. In a secular society, such as South Africa, with a secular constitution, this is a legitimate and altogether reasonable position to adopt.

Having said this, researchers need to consider that many individuals still take religious and other non-materialist views of human remains. In these views, the residues of human bodies are taken to be elevated above the material. Because such views persist, archaeologists, working from a rational materialist perspective,

often come into conflict with other interest groups. In many parts of the world, such contradictory views are accommodated in a 'sensible' way, with both parties making compromises so that research can continue whilst accommodating the concerns of religionists. An excellent example of this sensible approach is the set of guidelines for treatment of human remains excavated in Christian burial grounds in England jointly drafted by English Heritage (the statutory heritage body) and the Church of England (English Heritage 2005). The basis of this document is compromise and accommodation between the concerns of religion and research.

The opposite extreme is often encountered in so-called post-colonial societies. Australia and the United States are the most notorious examples. In these cases the contradictory views of researchers and, mostly, 'indigenous people' are not resolved in sensible ways, but debates become polarized and intransigent positions are adopted by both sides. In these situations, ancient human burials often become the pawns of petty politics and power struggles. Such conflicts usually either end in impasse or with one party 'winning' and then ignoring the views of the other parties. Neither of these situations is desirable. Co-operation and compromise are the only ways such situations can be resolved (e.g., Zimmerman 1992 on the burial issue in the United States).

In this section I hope to develop a sensible approach to the study of human remains in South Africa and so avoid the hysteria that has dogged similar research in other countries. Many ethical requirements and the need for consultation are enshrined within South African heritage law.

The law

In South Africa it is unlawful to remove or disturb human remains without lawful authority. A number of different laws relate to human burials, depending on their location and age. Burials in cemeteries managed by a local authority are subject to

local bylaws. Burials outside of cemeteries managed by a local authority and younger than sixty years are subject to the Human Tissue Act (Act No. 65 of 1983) and to local and regional regulations. All burials outside of cemeteries administered by a local authority that are older than sixty years are subject to the provisions of the National Heritage Resources Act (Act No. 25 of 1999, Section 36) and associated regulations (except those covered by the Commonwealth War Graves Act [Act No. 8 of 1992]). In addition to the specific protections given to human remains older than sixty years and located outside of a cemetery administered by a local authority, all human remains older than 100 years are considered to be ‘archaeological’ and thus receive general protection in terms of Section 35(4) of the National Heritage Resources Act. Most human burials studied by archaeologists, and certainly all those discussed in this thesis, fall within this last category.

An archaeological burial can be excavated only under a specific permit issued by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). One of the conditions of issue of such permits is that the applicant has made a “concerted effort to contact and consult communities and individuals who by tradition have an interest in such graves or burial ground” (Section 36(5)(a)) and to have “reached agreement with such communities and individuals regarding the future of such graves or burial grounds” (Section 36(3)(b)). Consultation and interaction with potential stakeholders is thus enshrined in law.

Scientific benefits of burial archaeology

Research into our past is of the utmost importance to help us understand ourselves better and, hopefully, to learn from past experiences. South Africa has a long and diverse past. The details of much of this past have been elided from public knowledge by the policies and misrepresentations of the apartheid state. It is the responsibility of archaeologists and historians to redress this situation by both studying and publicizing the cultural past of South Africa. Excavated human

remains and their contexts are an important source of direct evidence about the human past. Much of the information they provide cannot be recovered from other sources.

Amongst the most important information that can be recovered from human physical remains are the following:

- Demography
- Growth patterns
- Patterns of disease
- Genetic relationships
- Activity patterns
- Diet
- The history of disease

The contexts of burials and arrangement of bodies in them provide further information on the social, cultural and religious practices of the community that created the burials as well as details of the personal status and position of the deceased individuals. Many would consider the denial of this information to future generations to be unethical (e.g., Mays 2004). It is these social, cultural and religious practices that are of particular interest in this thesis.

Science continuously progresses technically, methodologically and theoretically. For this reason, it is desirable to retain collections of skeletal and cultural material in the long term. Such a strategy allows for the continued and repeated study of the material as science progresses. An example of the benefits of such a strategy is illustrated by the recent stable light isotope studies undertaken by Judith Sealy and collaborators on collections of skeletons that have been in museums for decades (e.g., Sealy & Pfeiffer 2000; Sealy 2006). Many studies of this sort require large samples to be available so that patterns in the data can be discerned (Sealy 2003).

Ethics

What constitutes an ‘ethical’ approach to something is always notoriously difficult to agree upon. When the ‘something’ in question is as emotive a topic as the excavation and study of human graves, the problems may seem insurmountable. The first statement that is usually made in a discussion of the ethical treatment of human remains is that they should be treated with respect and dignity. Whilst such a position can hardly be contested, it is not, in practical terms, all that useful. How, practically, do we go about being respectful? Indeed, what do we mean by ‘respect’? ‘Respect’, after all, is a culturally specific concept. Looking at the issue from another perspective, many practitioners would argue that *all* archaeological remains, of whatever sort, should be treated respectfully and carefully.

The most widely accepted statement on the treatment of archaeological human remains is the so-called Vermillion Accord on Human Remains. It was drafted by the physical anthropologist Michael Day (1990) and adopted by the first inter-congress of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) in 1989. It is a statement that “calls for mutual respect for the beliefs of indigenous peoples as well as the importance of science and education” (Day 1990:15). It is important in that it takes into account the views of both indigenous peoples and archaeologists. Whilst some doubts have been expressed about details of the accord (e.g., Houtman 1990), the general principles are certainly good and provide a sound basis for considering the treatment of human remains. Importantly, they form a basis for future negotiations and agreements.

South Africa was not party to the accord. At the time of its drafting and adoption the WAC was boycotting South Africa on political grounds (Ucko 1987). South Africa’s legislation on the excavation of archaeological human remains, drafted a decade after the Accord, follows similar principles, particularly insofar as it relates to the legitimate concerns of local communities. Whilst the principles and sentiments may be admirable, the difficulty of how to translate them into action has still to be resolved.

The Vermillion Accord on Human Remains

1. Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition.
2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred.
3. Respect for the wishes of the local community and of relatives or guardians of the dead shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful.
4. Respect for the scientific research value of skeletal, mummified and other human remains (including fossil hominids) shall be accorded when such value is demonstrated to exist.
5. Agreement on the disposition of fossil, skeletal, mummified and other remains shall be reached by negotiation on the basis of mutual respect for the legitimate concerns of communities for the proper disposition of their ancestors, as well as the legitimate concerns of science and education.
6. The express recognition that the concerns of various ethnic groups, as well as those of science, are legitimate and to be respected, will permit acceptable agreements to be reached and honoured.

The issue of legitimacy is a difficult one. Neither the Accord nor the South African Heritage Resources Act specify how legitimacy can be determined. When dealing with material of as emotive a nature as human remains there is always the danger of individuals or small groups exploiting the disposition and destiny of the remains for their own narrow political gains. This is, of course, a situation that both researchers and legitimate communities must guard against. Whilst it is important that we consider the views of all those with an interest, no one view can be given automatic preference. Importantly, it seems unavoidable that the only way of demonstrating legitimacy or to adjudicate between competing claims is through specific scientific research on the remains in question.

One of the greatest difficulties is deciding the maximum age of remains that could legitimately be claimed by a particular community. In England the situation has been quite clearly specified. Genealogical claims on remains are not usually considered for remains older than one hundred years (DCMS 2005; English Heritage 2005). The rationale for this time limit is that individuals who died more

than one hundred years ago may have many descendents from more than one community (DCMS 2005). It is more difficult to impose an upper time limit on claims by groups that human remains represent a common ancestor. It seems unlikely, however, that a direct link could be established between remains older than 1000 years and any particular group. This would assume a cultural stasis and essentialism that has long been seen as unreasonable.

It is important to note here that South African archaeologists and museum curators have been, and continue to be, proactive in considering the issues surrounding the excavation, study and curation of graves and human remains (e.g., Sealy 1995, 2003; Raath 2001; Halkett *et al.* 2004; Iziko 2005; ASAPA 2006). Of particular importance is the recent adoption by the Association of Southern African Professional Archaeologists (ASAPA) of a Code of Ethics and Minimum Standards of Practice that explicitly address concerns relating to human burials (ASAPA 2006).

The position adopted in this thesis

When considering how to deal with these issues in this thesis the position is somewhat easier: the study is not concerned with skeletons (or other human physical remains) at all. No skeletal material was analyzed in this study. Neither do I excavate any additional graves. This study is based entirely on published literature and documents and cultural material already in museum collections.

All material handled and analyzed in this study was treated with the utmost care and respect. In object handling and study I made every effort to meet international standards of best practice and comply with ASAPA minimum standards of practice. Whenever specified, I complied with the policies and regulations of repositories. All of the work I conducted was allowed by relevant South African laws.

I did not consult with any particular community at the beginning of this project for the simple reason that there was no obvious community with whom to engage. I did not intentionally deal with any material younger than two thousand years; most of the material came from contexts dated to between ten and two thousand years old. The age of the material means that there are no direct descendants with whom one may consult. I was at all times open to discussing the project with all and any interested parties.

Because the empirical focus of the study is burial structure and disposition, it is necessary, in some instances, to illustrate graves. I consider this to be acceptable because this is a professional report intended for a professional archaeological audience. The illustrations contribute materially to the understanding and interpretation of the material. Such illustrations are not gratuitous and are not intended to cause offence.

Studying the burials

The study of southern Cape burials and their significance in understanding Later Stone Age economic, social and symbolic life has reached a critical juncture. Much evidence has accumulated over the last seven decades but very little simultaneously co-ordinating and explanatory work has been attempted. Whilst it is true that more evidence from modern, meticulous excavations is needed—a perennial requirement that will remain for a long time to come—the task of co-ordinating the highly diverse evidence already available and, even more importantly, explaining the physical and conceptual patterns that I argue is now possible to discern is urgent. Working hypotheses can be tested by future discoveries, but they are also needed now to direct what would otherwise be directionless accumulation of observations. These working hypotheses bring to light just how much overlooked or marginalized evidence there actually is.

In pursuing this study I begin by discussing the theory and method necessary to answer the questions I ask (Chapter 2). Methodological reform is an important theme of this thesis. I then move on to review the history of research into human remains and burials in the southern Cape (Chapter 3). As with societies, research is built on its history, both positive and negative.

From this foundation I move to a methodologically and interpretatively important exercise in determining the extent of change and continuity between archaeological remains and San ethnographic accounts (Chapters 4 and 5). The findings of these chapters allow for the core interpretative section of the thesis in which I examine the symbolism of graves and their contents (Chapters 6 and 7). This interpretation culminates in a case study of the symbolism of graves at Oakhurst Shelter, George (Chapter 8).

With this view of grave symbolism, I then attend to the traditional, yet important, archaeological questions of determination of temporal (Chapter 9) and spatial variation (Chapter 10) amongst the burials. In the final chapter I return to more general concerns relating to change in southern Cape pre-contact Holocene Later Stone Age hunter-gatherer communities. I draw out the implications of my study for Later Stone Age research and the writing of hunter-gatherer history.