Hosted & indexed by Sabinet African Journals

The Dyke
www.thedyke.msu.ac.zw

ISSN 1815-9036 (Print)
ISSN 2790-9036 (Online)

Flint stone shards (*microliths*) scattered near a cave in Matopos, Matabeleland – an ancient historical find

Ross G. Cooper[a]
[a]Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published online, 2023

ABSTRACT

A visit to a batholith cave in Matopos in Zimbabwe revealed the presence of a significant quantity of microliths. These were collected and studied and suggestions of their use by stone age people are proposed.

KEYWORDS: Matopos, microliths, Zimbabwe, batholith cave flint, pre-history, stone age

The Dyke
www.thedyke.msu.ac.zw

16(3):1–6
ISSN 1815-9036 (Print)
ISSN 2790-9036 (Online)

CONTACT : Ross G. Cooper rgcooperuk@yahoo.com

Introduction

I collected an interesting set of schist stone tool shards (*microliths*) from a site located 10m from the mouth of a large batholith cave in Matopos, Matabeleland, Zimbabwe. There were large scattered granite rocks in the area and these were clearly where the ancient stone workers had once sat, as, indeed, the shards were innumerable and interspersed among them. They were in a variety of colours and no more than 5cm in length (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Examples of stone schist shard microliths found at the foot of Bambata Cave [left to right: scraper (1-2), arrow head (3 & 8), cleaver (4-7)]

Some resembled attempts at creating an arrow head, whilst others had a sharp serrated edge. In addition, some shards had experienced signs of weathering. Most shards showed evidence of lateral splinters after being hit by a downward trajectory force from above by a heavier rounded rock. Some of the microliths were possibly mounted in wood to form bladed scrapers, arrow barbs and arrow heads. A suitable piece of stone (anvil) was used to support the core when striking off flakes.

In the selection of stone artifacts I collected, some were possibly cleavers made from a pebble and flaked over both surfaces to give a sharp edge but remained non-pointed. Pebbles included quartz, agate and chalcedony, and all available locally (Tucker, 2021). Flakes were residue derived from the manufacture of tools and, being sharp edged, they were used for cutting and scraping.

The examples I collected were probably from the Early Stone Age and possibly of the Middle Stone Age, although the cleaver was rarely found in the latter period, having been replaced by large bifacial points. This area was therefore clearly once occupied by Early Stone Age and later by Khoi San people who were the aboriginal inhabitants of Southern Africa, descended from the last Stone Age hunter-gatherers (Cooper, 2009).

The Khoi San people inhabited much of Southern and South-Eastern Africa prior to arrival of the Bantu (ca.1,500-2,000 years ago). They were a transient society which hunted small antelope, insects and grubs, and gathered honey, edible fruits and roots using microlithic stone tools. Some of the digging implements included bored stones used for locating roots and tubers. Many of their stone tools were small and hafted together to form arrows, knives or adzes. The San never occupied permanent sites but instead followed the seasonal migrations of animals (Tucker, 2021).

In Bambata Cave, there was some later evidence of religious forbearance with Mashona ancestors in this particular area of Matopos (Cooper, 2021). Indeed, evidence of Iron Age clay paintings (ca.1,500 years ago) superimposed on the ancient illustrations were apparently adorned for rain-making ceremonies.

The Zimbabwe Stone Age is divided into three ages: Early (ca.2.5 million years ago; *Homo habilis* developed into *H. erectus* ca.2 million years ago), Middle (ca.150,000–20,000 years ago, *H. sapiens*), and Latter (ending in Matopos ca.16,000 years ago and the Wilton Industrial Complex which lasted from over 10,000 years ago up to the beginning of the Christian era; *H. sapiens*). These stages are useful in dividing up the long hunter-gatherer existence, and art seems to have developed in the latter part of the Middle Stone Age (after ca.40,000 years ago).

The site, Bambata Cave situated just North of Matopos National Park, is located a distance of 2km from the dirt road and, at the time I visited in 2006, it was overgrown and the 2-3m high Rhodes grass sported numerous bont ticks (*Amblyomma hebraeum*) detached from passing antelope. There was an old gravel path leading to the cave and evidence of many storm water furrows along its length, which would clearly be hard to navigate in the rainy season. The cave was situated high up on a hill and the trail was not very steep, although exceedingly rocky. The bush, however, was very thick and any spectacular views obliterated enroute. Parts of the path were direction indicated with large, faded dark green arrows painted on rocky outcrops, but clearly maintenance of the entire route had been lacking for decades. This cave was the site of the first

scientific excavation in Southern Africa carried out in 1918 by Dr.'s G. Arnold and N. Jones who found artifacts belonging to the Wilton Industrial Complex. Further excavations in 1926 and 1930, revealed artefacts belonging to the Middle Stone Age period and this era was named the Bambata Industry.

Ceramic pieces of Bambata Pottery dating from the Early Iron Age were also found. The excavation reached a depth of 5m with the lowest levels belonging to the Charama Industry, followed successively by the Bambata and Wilton Industry levels (Tabex Encyclopaedia Zimbabwe, 1987).

The cave was accessed by motorcar via a turnoff West of Kezi Road and sited 50km from Bulawayo. The dirt road leading to the cave was extremely neglected, and there were many exposed boulders and weathered areas in it making driving to the car park cumbersome and risky. Passengers had to disembark whilst the driver drove carefully over obstacles. Of interest was a Zimbabwe National Parks dustbin still attached to its pole but completely overflowing with rubbish. The green paint on it had long since weathered away. The sign post of the cave painted in dark green and yellow was also in need of a major repaint. However, visitors were certainly considerate and respectful, and did not leave their litter scattered about as one often observes in innumerable insignificant and historically important places in Britain!

The cave itself is large and hemispherical and the earliest archaeological deposits were estimated to be more than 130,000 years old, although the cave paintings date between 9,000-8,000 and 4,000-2,000 years ago, respectively. Walker (1996) provided a guidebook on the rock art in Matopos in which he rightly suggests that one merely has to visit a hill in the area to find evidence of ancient paintings in overhanging rock shelters. Unfortunately, some of the dates in his book are ambiguous.

Overall, the rock art in Bambata Cave consists of a frieze depicting animals and humans, a group of which appears wrapped in karosses. Some paintings in this cave suggest a trance like characteristic including people sitting in a squatting posture and holding their hands on their heads or hips. The sweat lines from armpits were included in a trance performance and perhaps demonstrate how energy is generated and transferred to or from a shaman who is enclosed in a line of figures. The motif line is possibly what the artist envisaged during a vision. In addition, there is a human with one hand on his head suggesting formling or the rendition of a powerful force, whilst he stands next to anthropomorphic figures with upraised hands showing their fingers. Other paintings depict wildebeest,

zebra, kudu, *tsessebe, impala*, lion, eland, giraffe, roan, reedbuck, sable and bushpig. There are a considerable number of rows of hunters interspersed with women holding digging sticks and bags.

The cave sports a high overhead granite ledge with orange and grey lichen adorning its surface. The back of the cave has several oval and crescentic forms with human heads, footprints and reclining figures positioned under blankets. Some of the animals are mixed in a spiritual form to assume a half-cheetah half-zebra persona. The elephants are rather faded.

A unique and interesting picture reveals the giant Middle Stone Age Cape horse (*Equus capensis*) which was once found in the area, but has been extinct for ca.90,000 years. There are numerous examples of other smaller creatures and one could assume that the area was once extremely abundant in wildlife including white and black rhinoceros. Sadly, as one meanders through Matopos, there is very little evidence of any significant animal herds apart from the occasional sighting of bird life, bat, dassie, cane rat, snake, wild dog, hyena, antelope, leopard and baboon.

Lastly, visitors deserve to be commended as none of the ancient paintings had been defaced in any way and there were no initials carved into the rocks or tree trunks. May these paintings, as part of the unique and extensive Zimbabwean heritage, remain preserved and guarded into the millennia.

References

Cooper, R.G. 2009. *The Mouldings of Chipinge*. *A historical and personal account of life in Rhodesia & Zimbabwe*. Durham, North Carolina: Lulu Press. pp. 130.

Cooper, R.G. 2021. A child's Gazaland historical find. *Heritage of Zimbabwe* 40: 179-181.

Tabex Encyclopedia Zimbabwe. 1987. Harare: Quest Publishing, pp. 431.

Tucker, M. 2021. The First European visitors to view the Victoria Falls before the end of 1880. *Heritage of Zimbabwe* 40: 29-56.

Walker, N. 1996. *The Painted Hills*. Gweru, Mashonaland: Mambo Press. pp. 102