

# Foragers in the middle Limpopo Valley: trade, place-making, and social complexity

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*To my children, India and Bodhi, and my wife, Kath*



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# Chapter 1: Interactions, frameworks and complexity

A great amount of research has been dedicated to understanding past forager-farmer relations in southern Africa. From these studies, a wide mix of responses to farmer interactions have been observed in different social contexts. In KwaZulu-Natal's Thukela Basin, South Africa, for example, settlement shifts in response to farmers arriving in the area led to the occupation of more mountainous areas not suitable for agricultural (Mazel 1989). Similarly, in the Great Fish River region of the Eastern Cape, foragers retired further into mountainous regions to avoid or temper interactions with farmers (S. Hall 1994). In south-eastern Botswana, settlement mobility allowed foragers to interact with farmers at certain times but then remove themselves from contact situations during others (Sadr 2002). In South Africa's Madikwe region, North-West Province, some foragers came to live amongst farmers, possibly through marriage, but continued producing stone tools while living in the fixed farmer settlement (S. Hall 2000). Forager activity and behaviour patterns across the subcontinent shifted in many other ways, with some assisting in mining activities (Denbow 1999), ritual practices (Schoeman 2006) and craft production (Wadley 1996). However, it was in the middle Limpopo valley (Figure 1.1) that a unique set of forager-farmer interactions took place, allowing foragers to access part of the farmer market economy and acquire social status.

In the valley, trade, centralisation, ritual control and the appearance of polities played a major role in the establishment of state-level society (Huffman 2009, 2012). From possibly as early as AD 350, pioneer or transitory farmer communities appeared (Hall & Smith 2000), but only around 900 AD did large



Figure 1.1: The southern African region with key areas indicated as well as the middle Limpopo Valley. a, approximate area demarcating central southern Africa; b, approximate area demarcating the Kalahari Desert; 1, Dobe-Nyae Nyae area; 2, Tsodilo Hills and the Okavango Delta; 3, Makgadikgadi Pans; 4, Matopo National Park; 5, approximate location of Sofala; 6, middle Limpopo Valley; 7, Magaliesberg; 8, Thukela Basin and KwaZulu-Natal; 9, Great Fish River and Eastern Cape; and 10, Western Cape. The arrow along Mozambique's coastline indicates the trade winds.

numbers of Zhizo-using farmers settle the valley (Huffman 2009). This settlement appears linked to east coast international trade since at the time a large elephant population resided in the valley and their ivory was a valuable trade commodity (Forssman et al. 2014). Trade resulted in the appearance of exotic goods including glass beads, coastal shell and cloth (Huffman 2009; Wilmsen 2009). During this early Zhizo trading period, what Renfrew (1984) called early state modules with nodal settlements that controlled local power, appeared in central southern Africa. This continued into the following phase when Leopard's Kopje producers settled the valley at approximately 1000 AD. They took control of local trade networks and established political dominance (Huffman 2000). Over the course of the following c. 200 years, socio-political developments led to the establishment of Mapungubwe, arguably southern Africa's first state-level society (Huffman 2015a). Here, the chief physically separated himself from the surrounding population and resided on a hilltop settlement surrounded by elite groups. Immense wealth was controlled through Mapungubwe, craft specialisation occurred, and ritual authority was held by the chief (Huffman 2009; Meyer 1998). Mapungubwe's influence declined around 1300 AD (Prinsloo et al. 2011) when political control shifted to Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 2009).

Forager communities were present from before the appearance of farmers and during the phases leading to the Mapungubwe state (e.g. van Doornum 2005). Not only did they witness these developments but participated in them by contributing to local economies. And yet, foragers are seldom thought of as contributors to the appearance of complexity in southern Africa. More often, they are abstracted from socio-political and historical entanglements (Denbow 2017). Generally, they are considered to have been present but not to have supported socio-political change or taken part in the associated developments. This may be the case in other parts of southern Africa, but not the middle Limpopo Valley. Here they were active agents within the broader system. Studying the forager sequence in this area provides insights into forager adaptability and access patterns as well as the ways in which foragers empowered themselves within the local socio-political landscape.

The role foragers played in engineering southern African cultural and social landscapes often lacks significant discussion. Instead, archaeologists have tended to focus on ecological adaptations (Parkington 1980, 2001; Sealy 2006), settlement and landscape utilisation patterns (Barham 1992; S. Hall 1994; Mazel 1989; Mitchell 1996, 2003a; Mitchell et al. 2011; Wadley 1987, 1992), shifts in material culture and lifeways (Denbow 1999; Denbow & Wilmsen 1986; Gronenborn 2004; Hobart 2004; Mitchell 2003a; Sadr 2003), and rock art (Challis 2012; Dowson 1994; Eastwood & Eastwood 2006; Eastwood & Smith 2005; S. Hall 1994; Jolly 1996; Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981, 1982; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2012; Smith & Ouzman 2004), amongst other topics (see Mitchell 2002a). The value of these studies cannot be understated. They have been crucial to our understanding of southern African forager lifeways, interactions and social change. While much has been learnt, and no doubt more of southern Africa's forager heritage will be uncovered if this direction is maintained, foragers also played crucial roles in the development of local socio-political networks and mercantile economies (see Denbow 2017), especially in the middle Limpopo Valley. If we neglect acknowledging their contributions to social change in southern Africa, extant communities are denied access to their ancestral heritage and earlier perceptions of foragers are perpetuated.

Foragers were involved in social change and development. They were not passive in their interactions but adapted as well as contributed to cultural transformations. The social changes that occurred in the valley had a deep impact on forager communities. That they witnessed and contributed to these processes, all the while maintaining their own lifeways, attests to their adaptability, resilience and the value farmers placed on their indigenous knowledge systems. It also implicates them in important social, political and economic processes occurring in southern Africa at this time. The role that foragers played is seldom acknowledged and yet it demonstrates their contributions to social and economic growth. The tendency to view foragers as passive agents in social interactions for these

reasons is incorrect and further disenfranchises extant communities from their ancestral heritage. Showing their involvement in important socio-political systems relies on several fundamentally transformative social features. These are foragers' involvement in: local trade markets, wealth accumulation, specialisation of craft production, and the appearance of nodal places and centres on the landscape. To understand what these features imply in relation to social complexity, a more detailed archaeological background is necessary.

### **An archaeological context for foragers in the middle Limpopo Valley**

One of the aims of this book is to bring together a series of research projects that have been conducted independently of one another, but which together help us gain a far richer understanding of forager social patterns, cultural change and landscape representations. Over the coming chapters this will be explored in great detail. The outline provided here, however, offers a basic overview of the forager sequence in order to lay a foundation for its reconstruction in the coming pages. This review is presented along with the local farmer record for it provides a cultural backdrop for much that occurred in the valley even in forager society. Framing this sequence following ethnic or subsistence-based modes of identity advances an essentialistic structuring of past identities. To avoid this, even if only in a thinly veiled manner, chronological phases are used.

What is of interest are the centuries leading up to contact with farmers. Most importantly, they reflect forager lifeways just before they were disrupted, changed, or enlivened by the arrival of incoming groups. The pre-contact sequence offers a perspective of forager lifeways across the region and develops a sense of behaviour patterns, economic systems, settlement habits, and, if ethnography is relied upon, social value systems. Of course, stretching well before the onset of contact between foragers, herders and farmers, is the complete Later Stone Age sequence. In the middle Limpopo Valley, this extends back to between at least 11,075 and 10,632 BC based on the dated assemblage from Balerno Main Shelter (van Doornum 2008). How relatable behaviour patterns during the early Holocene phase is to those occurring immediately before contact with incoming groups is not known, nor can it be examined at present since these lower levels at Balerno Main, as well as Tshisiku Shelter first occupied between 5712 and 5318 BC, have not been studied in detail (van Doornum 2007, 2008). Therefore, van Doornum (2005) considers the period dating about a millennium before the arrival of farmers, 1220 BC, as a control, and there is no reason why this should be challenged. It marks the beginning of Phase 1 (Chapter 3).

By at least the beginning of the third century AD, possibly herder but definitely farmer communities arrived in central southern Africa (Huffman 2007: 123 & 135). They brought with them very different settlement patterns, subsistence habits, and material culture to that of the incumbent forager community. However, the exact appearance of farmers is difficult to place. Complicating the matter is the local appearance of Bambata ceramics (c. AD 200-555; Huffman 2005). Huffman (1994, 2005, 2007) argued that the facies was produced by farmers and he placed it in the Benfica ceramic branch. However, others have contended that Bambata ceramics were produced by pastoralists or semi-sedentary foragers (e.g. Denbow 1984; Reid et al. 1998). Moreover, the facies' chronology spans periods predating the arrival of farmers (Sadr 2008a: see the Appendix). For these reasons, Bambata cannot reliably be used to indicate a farmer settlement especially when it has only been recovered from Later Stone Age contexts in the valley (Hall & Smith 2000). It is only when Happy Rest ceramics appear (AD 450-750; Huffman 2007: 127), along with the nearby appearance of Silver Leaves in Zimbabwe (AD 280-450; Huffman 2007: 123), that a farmer presence can reliably be inferred (Huffman 2009). However, no associated homesteads have been identified in the valley. Only at rainmaking sites have Happy Rest ceramics been recovered, but this may nonetheless indicate that farmers had indeed settled the valley (Huffman 2009). At first, this may have been in small pioneer groups or while in transit (Hall & Smith 2000). Using AD 100 as the earliest period before the onset of contact is, for these reasons, a conservative benchmark, and the interface between Phases 1 and 2 (Chapter 3).

While the timing of the first farmers settling the valley is to some extent unclear, by AD 900 they had settled the area in large numbers. These first farmers produced what are called Zhizo ceramics and its appearance coincides with the local arrival of exotic trade wealth (Huffman 2000, 2009). The impact trade had on their economy and environment is uncertain. Many have suggested that alternate sources of wealth, such as cattle (*Bos taurus*), played an important role in society (Denbow 1984; Kuper 1982; Pikirayi 2001: 87). Locally sourced trade goods and access to these resources also became important and multiple regions containing exchangeable resources were exploited by the eighth century AD. Many of these items were used to acquire goods coming from the east coast of Africa (Huffman 2000). With the settlement of the middle Limpopo Valley, much of this became centralised or controlled through this very connected landscape (Chapter 2). It also may partly be what attracted Leopard's Kopje-users into the region around 1000 AD (Huffman 2000: 20), marking the end of what is considered here as Phase 3 (Chapter 4).

The fourth and final phase includes the most significant social shifts that would occur in the valley. Appearing in the valley around 1000 AD was a branch of the Leopard's Kopje Tradition, the K2 facies. K2 users formed a ranked and kin-based society with a political centre at Bambandyanalo (also referred to as K2; Huffman 2009). The resident chief lived around the central cattle kraal in a settlement pattern termed by Kuper (1982) and identified by Huffman (1990) as the Central Cattle Pattern. By AD 1060, Bambandyanalo's court midden, an indicator of political activity (Huffman 1982, 1986a, 2000), had grown significantly demonstrating the settlement's growing regional importance. In the twelfth century AD, this enormous midden engulfed a portion of the central kraal and instead of moving the midden, the cattle were relocated to outside the settlement. This emphasises the newly developed importance placed on socio-political structures as opposed to cattle wealth (Calabrese 2000a). This same pattern was adopted at Mapungubwe when it was settled around 1220 AD. Here, there is no evidence of a kraal near the court located at the base of the hill, emphasising economic and political shifts (Huffman 2009: 43). The settlement also does not follow the Central Cattle Pattern. Other important developments from K2 to Mapungubwe were: the physical separation of the leader from the surrounding population; elite spaces with some demarcated by stone walling; noble residences surrounding the hill; gold items associated with burials; the control of ritual activities such as rainmaking; and increased wealth accumulation from international trade (Huffman 2009, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). Given the context of these features and Mapungubwe's chronology, Huffman (e.g. 1982, 1986a, 1986b, 2000, 2015a, 2015b) concluded that it was here that both state-level society and the Zimbabwe culture developed, from where it was imported to Great Zimbabwe. Its decline at AD 1300 marks the end of Phase 4 (Chapter 5).

Phases 1 to 4 are characterised by several important shifts. These all played a role in local social tapestries and the way foragers were able to intertwine themselves into this fabric. The appearance and centralisation of local and international trade played a major role in the development of elite groups and social complexity. Unlike most places in the world, foragers participated in this and were part of the distribution network if we consider their access to wealth items, such as glass beads, indicative of their ability to acquire and accumulate wealth (Forssman 2017). The establishment of local and nearby polities was also important, and no doubt played a role in the influence of authorities and the flow of power and wealth. Foragers, in proximity to these centres, likely interacted more regularly and perhaps had differential access patterns to goods and social status (Hall & Smith 2000). Similar peer-places appear on the forager landscape but instead of emphasising political control they emphasise traditional knowledge systems and practices. Having a massive bearing on local foragers was the development of state-level society within the farmer community. Stratified social networks and hierarchies no doubt subjected foragers to this form of social ordering. Where in this arrangement they were placed seems to vary across the landscape, but they certainly were accommodated. Social stratification, among the other features, led to the eventual establishment of Mapungubwe, at which trade centralisation, ritual control, elite spaces and political authority all occurred. But, it precipitated a lengthy series of

interactions with foragers. Their role in farmer society, and more generally on the social landscape, contributed to the penultimate settlement of the hilltop palace. Moreover, it appears to have led to the rise of complexity in forager society as well.

### Interactions, trade and access networks

Forager-farmer interactions are inferred from cultural material. Items such as ceramics, glass beads, livestock remains and metal in forager contexts are generally thought to indicate trade, exchange or other relations with farmers (Figure 1.2). This relies on two important assumptions. First, that foragers were not producing any of these items themselves and that material remains can reliably indicate cultural groups. While still possible, evidence suggesting foragers were producing their own ceramics or herding livestock in the valley is so far absent. Glass beads, also, came from southeast Asia (Robertshaw *et al.* 2010) and while foragers may have been involved in this trade, they did not advocate it, obtain comparably more beads than farmers, or incorporate beads into their society to the extent that farmers did. Therefore, in the valley, concluding that farmer-associated items including exotic trade goods did in fact come from farmers is highly reasonable. Second, emphasis is placed on our ability to observe these exchanged products in the

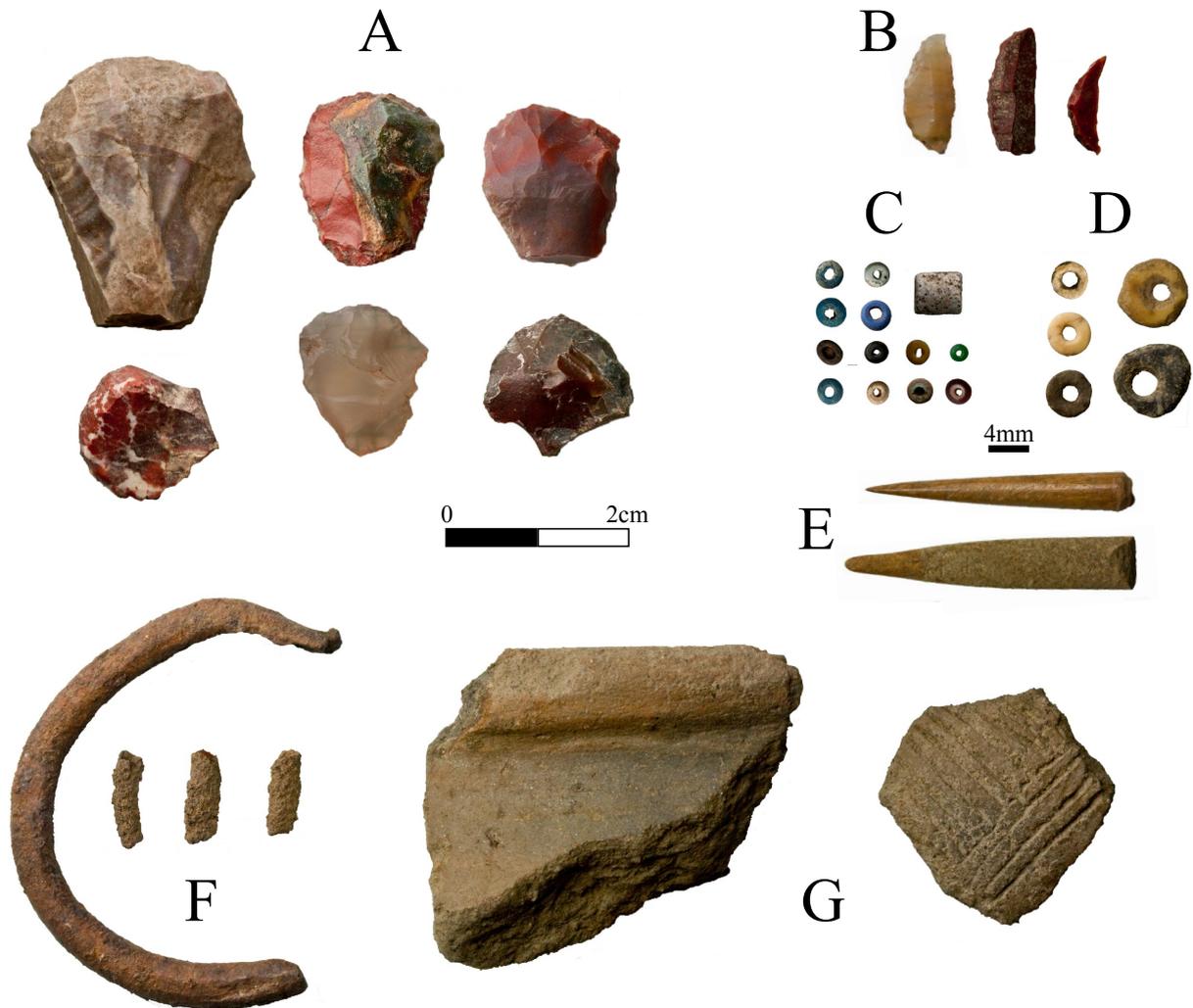


Figure 1.2: Some examples of items possibly associated with trade as well as trade items themselves. From Dzombo Shelter: A, scrapers; B, backed tools; and E, worked bone tools; from João Shelter: C, glass beads; D, ostrich eggshell beads (complete); F, metal fragments (probably copper ornaments); and G (right), ceramic; and from Kambaku Camp: G (left), ceramic.

archaeological record. Subsistence goods, for example, generally do not preserve archaeologically and the ceramics that appear in forager contexts may have been transport vessels as opposed to the intended trade good (e.g. Korsman & Plug 1994). Therefore, caution is advised when determining the scope of forager-farmer interactions based solely on observable trade wealth. Instead, what is found should be considered a minimum indicator of trade.

Various farmer goods appear in forager contexts and sometimes in large numbers. Those with the greatest impact were probably glass beads. For example, Hall and Smith (2000) recovered evidence from Little Muck Shelter suggesting that before contact, c. 350 AD, foragers used the site purely as an occupation camp. Vestiges of their activities include an assemblage with various formal stone tools as well as bone tools, faunal remains from a broad subsistence base, and manufacturing debris from shell bead production possibly for small-scale trade or personal use. From the local appearance of farmers, the use of Little Muck began to change. Hall and Smith (2000) suggested it came to serve as a workshop based on a proliferation of stone scrapers used to produce trade-related items from the first centuries AD until about 900 AD, when the site became an intensive production base. Goods being manufactured at the site were thought to have primarily been animal hides, but a use-wear study suggested wooden and bone items might also have been manufactured (Forssman *et al.* 2018). These were probably traded for consumables delivered in earthenware pots, or for the pots themselves, but also for glass beads. Those living at the site were multi-craft producers and the level of craft production perhaps signals specialisation (Chapter 6).

Not only did trade impact craft production activities, but also resource exploitation intensity. At Dzombo Shelter, a shift in the production of backed stone tools corresponding with the arrival of farmers in the region was investigated to observe whether this reflected a change in behaviour patterns (Forssman 2015). Damage on the tools consistent with impact-related activities, such as those that form during hunting, were found to increase at the same time. These findings suggest that foragers using the site began hunting more regularly or intensively after they came into contact with farmers. The occurrence of earthenware ceramics and glass beads at the site, and later metal, suggest this may have been for trade. Therefore, the arrival of farmers in the middle Limpopo Valley both changed and increased trade demands, and this impacted the behaviour patterns of local foragers.

At present, very little has been written of the forager involvement in trade networks despite the strong archaeological evidence demonstrating exchange with farmers (see Denbow 2017). What might the presence of these items in forager contexts indicate? Does it show that certain foragers acted as local merchants? Could the regular appearance of these goods and their accumulation in some contexts suggests that foragers, through trade, accumulated wealth and developed social status? How might foragers have perceived this trade from their own perspectives? The appearance of items such as glass beads, metal implements and ceramics at forager sites indicate that they had access to these resources through exchange, labour arrangements or other means. The relationship between foragers and farmers, thus, brought trade wealth into the forager cultural repertoire and it also possibly stimulated change within their society, even creating hierarchies. Evidence from the valley offers suitable data to answer the questions listed above and provides perspectives on these issues that are not always possible to infer from other regions. In most cases, it also indicates landscape wide patterns that are seldom congruent with one another.

### Place-making

Spaces and places can be framed in several ways. An approach preferred here is Manuel Castells (1972) *spaces of flow* (described in Chapter 6). In its barest state, *space* is temporally variable and socially constructed. Multiple *flows* can occur in a single space which is contingent on its use by the occupants, the role of exchangers (circuits of information flow, e.g. rock art), the site's orientation within a broader socially created landscape, and the influence of authorities. How these features intersect determines to a large extent the filling of

space with culturally meaningful items, symbols and functions. One can examine these relationships by interpreting sites on a single landscape as subject to interconnective networks and social patterns that are reflected spatially and within spaces. Space, therefore, is itself an item of cultural material.

In the middle Limpopo Valley, forager spaces and places have been well-studied. Initially, though, there was an emphasis on large shelters with smaller, less impressive sites being ignored (Forssman 2010, 2014a). However, this has changed and now a wider range of sites have been studied (see Forssman 2013, 2014a for examples not listed here). This includes Balerno Main, a very large north-facing shelter in a stand-alone sandstone exposure in a widespread sandstone belt. The site is at least 3km from any known farmer settlement (van Doornum 2008). Little Muck, while also north-facing but smaller, is situated along a ridge near to a seasonal river not far from a large farmer settlement, Leokwe Hill (Hall & Smith 2000). Nearby are several rain-control sites (EH Hill, M3S Hill and Ratho Kroonkop) that contain possible evidence of a forager presence in this otherwise farmer-associated ritual space (Schoeman 2009). Much like Little Muck, Dzombo has a similar social and environmental context but a notably different sequence (Forssman 2014b). A few hundred meters away is João Shelter, which contains a sheltered and open-air homestead component (Forssman 2016a). From Dzombo, it is on the opposite side of a large farmer settlement called Mmamagwa. Isolated like Balerno Main, are Balerno Shelters 2 and 3, but both are small with limited internal space and situated very near to one another (van Doornum 2000, 2005, 2014). Tshisiku is a mid-sized shelter that is not far from the large farmer settlement of Pont Drift (van Doornum 2007). Lastly, west of Tshisiku and south from Dzombo and João is Euphorbia Kop, a multi-tiered (based on hillside terraces) K2-period (AD 1000 to 1220) farmer settlement with strong evidence of a forager presence (Seiler 2016). This variety of settlement contexts demonstrates various cultural consistencies and discontinuities expressed spatially as well as chronologically. The evidence suggests several contested spaces, peer-places and topographies of power existed within forager constructions of the landscape as it did in farmer society.

The implications of the forager's social landscape are far-reaching. First, it indicates site-based strata. Each site had its role and these related to one another, as will be shown. Sequential changes are often reflected regionally suggesting broader social patterns responsible for altering site functions and positions within larger networks. These networks comprise various forms of exchangers that operate as a circuitry (Castells 1972). Communication and value systems, for example, are transferred along exchangers and influence activities, decision making, economies, and the nodality or peripherality of sites. All of these change episodically; hence the notion of flows (Castells 1972, 2000; Forssman & Louw 2018). Second, evidence suggests sites may have been ranked. Over time, change at certain sites suggests smaller groups used them and that they fell out of favour. Those groups possessed fewer trade items than those using sites like Little Muck and Dzombo. These two sites, and more emphatically the former, became centres of trade with large reserves of wealth being acquired and accumulated at these shelters. While these sites appear to exhibit shifting responses, reactions and preferences during the first millennium AD and beyond, Balerno Main expresses general continuity. Thus, place-making and how these spaces relate to one another was based on connective elements of the landscape. The changes in places, access to wealth, craft specialisation and landscape patterning leads to a certain inevitable question: did foragers develop complex society?

### **Complexity in forager society**

Forager complexity is almost absent from discussions in southern Africa where complexity is typically reserved for farmer society. In other parts of the world, discussions around forager complexity are fairly advanced. One issue, among others, that is picked on by many authors is well-established and long-distance trade networks (e.g. Headland & Reid 1989). These systems help dispel the notion that foragers were isolates because of their involvement within them. They instead imply inter-group trade and exchange through forager interactions with neighbouring people. Moreover, identified among

forager groups are complex settlement systems, well-developed economies and wealth accumulation, cultivation of domestic stock, delayed-return economies, animal husbandry, and hierarchal or ranked band structures (Guenther 1996; S. Hall 1994; Headland & Reid 1989; Kusimba 2005; Lombard *et al.* 2020; Plug *et al.* 2003; Sadr 2003). In many contexts, a combination of these features are found that exist along a spectrum of development; in some instances, practices such as animal husbandry, for example, might be limited (Hobart 2004) whereas in other cases, or environmental conditions, this is far more developed (Tanaka 1976; Wiessner 1977). In addition, foragers varied greatly across regions and over time (Sadr *et al.* 2003; Wadley 2000). Where it has been discussed, complexity is a historical process and not an essentialised concept (Kusimba 2005). For this reason, it need not conform to farmer complexity in the valley, but rather a developmental process within forager society.

Importantly, why has it scarcely been spoken about in a southern African context (but see Kusimba 2005)? Considering that research in this part of the world has been diverse and represents a diaspora of ideas, methodologies and theoretical perspectives, the absence of complexity in most discussions is a noticeable omission. One could speculate why this might be so. From the first encounters with Bushmen, colonial settlers described them with absolute disdain; as aberrations of humanity, wretched specimens, or vermin. They were persecuted, imprisoned and murdered after providing little or any provocation (see Forssman 2019; Francis 2009). Other than this, the general perception was that southern African foragers were incapable of escaping their very lowly station. They were vagabonds that did not possess the ability to become affluent, develop their society and enhance their status. They were all but totally devoid of culture. This perception, tragically, is not moot in modern society (Francis 2009). These views have shaped perspectives of past foragers and perhaps led to a reluctance to consider complexity within their society.

The Kalahari Debate has seen a rehearsal of some of these early colonial perceptions. Namely, the essentialisation of Bushmen and the notion of stasis within their society (Sylvain 2015). The latter view perpetuates in archaeological studies, notably with the view that Bushman culture existed as far back as 44,000 years at Border Cave, South Africa (d'Errico *et al.* 2012; and see Pargeter *et al.* 2016). Despite the lack of any resolution in the Kalahari Debate, which was all to do with the application of ethnography to understand Bushman identities now and before colonial contact (Kurtz 1994), archaeologists continue liberally using ethnography to interpret past lifeways, learning very little new in the process (Sadr 2002). This led Parkington (1984) to call, at a very early stage, for scholars to 'de-!Kung' Later Stone Age archaeology. Rather than rehearsing modern information again and again in different iterations, a call was also made to use archaeology as an ethnography of the past (Jerardino 2001). This would circumvent the colonially-derived ethnographic record collected following mostly only western perspectives and categorisations of people (Parkington 1984; Sylvain 2015; Wilmsen 1983). Despite reservations, ethnography plays an important role in our construction of the past (Pearce 2012).

Is there a reluctance to think beyond ethnography? Our reliance on ethnographic information is self-evident with many studies maximising its value (see Pearce 2012). But, has it become a trap? Comments by Parkington (1984), Jerardino (2001) and Sadr (2002) certainly provide that impression and there is clear evidence that archaeologists are accentuating its applicability outside of the field of rock art (for an Iron Age example see Lane's 2004 comments). Perhaps, the problem resides in the fear of moving away from ethnography and becoming stranded in doldrums absent of meaning. Through ethnography greater insights into intangible cultural heritage can be obtained (Laudan 2004) even if this leads to an over-reading of archaeological residues (Mitchell 2003a). It may be better to view ethnography as a part of the picture, but not as a cultural delimiter. In other words, ethnographic compendiums are singular examples of cultural entities recorded at a specific time and in a specific context. It is not the singular possibility of a forager history or culture. It fits within a greater expanse of cultural groupings and traits which vary temporally and spatially. The assumption that ethnography applies across regions,

people and time presents an ahistoric and anti-landscape perspective of forager pasts. Ethnography is not a codex; it is context specific and a part of cultural fluctuations (Wiessner 1977). Moving beyond it, but being guided by certain principles, enriches our view of foragers when combined with empirical data. It also helps acknowledge a more complex archaeological sequence that included multiple cultural trajectories (Kusimba 2005: 353). Focusing on forager histories creates a more dynamic reading of the past than bounded ethnographies are capable of doing.

The notion that complexity developed within forager society is grounded in archaeological data. The presence of trade wealth, wealth accumulation and peer-places are examples of a forager community exhibiting certain elements that are typical of stratified societies who have developed social complexity. One other matter that need not rely on social complexity *within* forager society is that forager communities were part of a landscape that hosted the appearance of state-level society. They were part of social networks on the landscape, socio-political developments and merchant economies. They were part of the development towards social complexity through their contributions to these systems. That they have seen absolutely no airtime in discussions around this matter further shows how they have been disarticulated with important social developments in southern African histories. An important aim of this book is to address this discord: what has been attributed to middle Limpopo Valley foragers versus the influential role that they seem to have played.

## Goals

Several goals are envisioned here. Two, however, are prominent and from these all others stem. The first is to generate a single output that brings together several unrelated and yet overlapping research projects. The initial work by Walker (1994) in eastern Botswana was not followed-up with any research until S. Hall and his team (Hall & Smith 2000) began working in northern South Africa in the late 1990s. This led to van Doornum's masters (2000) and eventual doctoral study (2005). Later, the author received his masters in the same region (Forssman 2010), followed by his doctoral degree from work in eastern Botswana (Forssman 2014a). From these research programs and others, a range of studies have been published (Brunton *et al.* 2013; Forssman 2010, 2014b, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Forssman *et al.* 2018; Murray 2016; Seiler 2016; van Doornum 2007, 2008, 2014; van Zyl 2019). Interest in the region's Later Stone Age is once again peaking with a series of new projects starting. However, the variety of studies are largely disjointed or not concerned with landscape patterns. The local sequence is known, therefore, through several study sites that are largely spoken of as islands. Since these projects, for the most part, articulate poorly, and considering the uprising of interest in the region, producing a synthesis of the results so far collected seems highly topical.

Bringing this research together is important because of the unusual set of social relations and socio-political developments in the middle Limpopo Valley. These heavily impacted social relations unlike anywhere else in southern Africa. No-where else did foragers witness and partake in state formation developments. Their participatory role in these processes gave them access to local economies, wealth and possibly status. Generally, foragers are not viewed as active agents within large-scale socio-political advances. However, they traded with farmers, produced goods that were used to acquire exotic commodities, and provided services for farmers, implicating them in farmer economies. In doing this, a flexible framework for the forager archaeology of the region is outlined.

The second goal is to redress how contact between foragers and farmers is perceived. Generally, foragers are not considered to have possessed agency within the social landscapes they share with farmers or Europeans. Instead, their histories are relegated from discussions to do with socio-political and economic developments in more complex social environments. Rather than being active, they are seen as passive role players who exist, more generally, on the outskirts of society or whose roles are

mediated by others. This could not be more apparent than in the middle Limpopo Valley where after decades of research the role of foragers in society at large has been almost entirely neglected other than those focusing solely on forager sequences. Framing this landscape has been done using social and economic categories that do not blend. Instead, the aim here is to de-partition these constructions and view the landscape as a dynamic social network with cross pollinating identities, merging economies, cultural borrowings, and competing or incongruent value systems.

### **Chapter outline**

Chapter 2 begins by describing the local context of the study area. The environment and topography are presented along with the contexts and descriptions for each of the study sites. With this, the excavation methods, stratigraphy and chronology of each is provided. The chapter lays a foundation for the forthcoming data chapters in order to contextualise the excavation results. The data chapters are composed of two broad sections. Each opens by providing the archaeological background for the appropriate phase: Phases 1 and 2 in Chapter 3, Phase 3 in Chapter 4 and Phase 4 in Chapter 5. This is then followed by a results section which also discusses key patterns and site-specific details. These discussions depend on the data but include trade or exchange practices, craft goods, settlement types and site status. Chapter 6 then provides a more general discussion relating the finds from the valley to three key concepts. It discusses trade, exchange and mercantilism, socio-spatial constructions and place-making, and complexity. The first two topics provide the basis for considering social complexity in forager society. The chapter concludes by contextualising these discussions within a broader central southern African framework. Lastly, Chapter 7 provides an overview of the sequence and conclusions drawn from the discussion in Chapter 6 before presenting topics and themes that may be worth considering in on-going studies in the valley and beyond.