McGregor Museum Kimberley

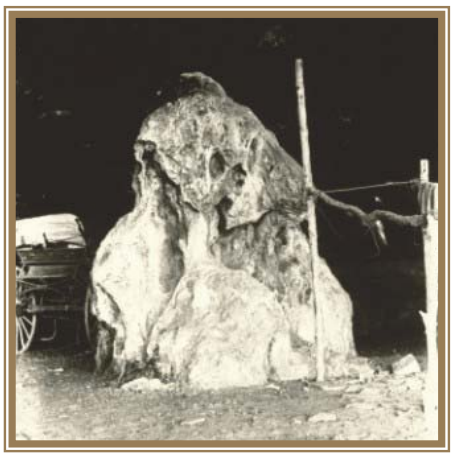
Archaeology Department: Wonderwerk Cave




Aspects of this research are on-going, for example on dating and the reconstruction of past climates and lifeways. The major findings thus far indicate, inter alia, that in the earliest levels of the cave there is unique evidence on how local humans lived during remote hand-axe times. The associations in the cave of stone tools and animal remains has been read as evidence for a 'home base' mode of social organisation. The meat sources in question range from hare and tortoise to big game. Archaeologist Peter Beaumont argues that these finds suggest people were actively hunting and not merely scavenging, as has often been supposed for those early periods.

Extensive layers of humified-calcified remains of grass stems and shrub branches have been interpreted as representing carefully harvested bedding, made up of soft plants, on which the early human occupants slept. These 'bedding' areas are distinct from those apparently used for tool making or food processing: activities within the cave were spatially patterned. There is also pervasive evidence, in the form of ash lenses, charred-calcined animal bones, and even fire-cracked stones, for regular use or production of fire throughout at least the past 800 000 years. Other indications of advanced behavioural traits by occupants of the early levels at the cave, suggests Beaumont, are the presence of red ochre fragments recovered from outcrops near the cave and probably used for body decoration, as also quartz crystals and small coloured river pebbles that are foreign to the cave vicinity, evidently collected and brought to the site.

Technological change is represented by a long sequence from stone handaxes, cleavers and unsophisticated flake tools at the base; through levels containing stone points, blades and prepared cores (along with handaxes) that are advanced compared with industries of the same period in other parts of the Old World; refined stone blades and segments of Middle Stone Age affinities; and Later Stone Age material from levels of the last 10 000 years including engraved stones, ground stone arm-rings, microlithic (small stone) tools, bone and wooden arrow points, ostrich eggshell beads and pieces of decorated eggshell water flasks. The upper-most level, less than 1500 years old, contained potsherds and fat-tailed sheep hair, testifying to the presence of a new lifestyle based not exclusively on foraging (hunting and gathering) but also on herding.



The dryness of the deposit has meant that preservation is often exceptional. In one of the levels at the back of the cave, dating from a little more than 10 000 years ago, perfectly preserved plant and animal remains were found that include horns and horn cores of various animals including extinct forms, that accumulated during a cooler and drier “ice age” climate that prevailed then. Indeed, part of the site's special significance is the evidence it has yielded on climate change. As well as people, the cave was home to creatures such as owls. Owls in turn fed on small mammals like mice, which are sensitive to changing climate. The owl droppings, in different layers of the site, contain the bones of various species of small animals. The many thousands of tiny bones that have been painstakingly sorted and identified have been read off by archaeozoologists in terms of an amazingly detailed record of shifting environments outside the cave. For some periods the surrounding region was warmer and wetter than now; for others it was cold, dry and inhospitable.

In the area near the cave mouth the walls are covered by “finger paintings” in various shades of ochre, as well as white and black, that feature a variety of animals including eland, elephant and ostriches, and also abstract designs. When the traveller Henry Methuen visited the site in 1844 he remarked on these paintings and on “remnants” of the San who were still living “in the

vicinity." Twentieth century graffiti that once marred the site were carefully removed by experts in the early 1990s.

Engraved stones from Wonderwerk Cave, well dated in levels dating back to 10 000 years ago, may also include examples from pre-Holocene levels possibly as old or older than those reported from Blombos Cave (77 000 years old) on the south Cape coast.

The most recent archaeological traces at Wonderwerk are those of the farmer, P.E. Bosman, who with his wife, eleven sons and three daughters lived in the cave from 1909 to 1911 while he was building the present homestead. They made a floor of flat stones in the cave to keep down the dust. Subsequently they used the cave as a shelter for their stock.

Exploration of the archaeological deposits for "bat guano" in the early 1940s resulted in major damage to the upper levels in the area from 35 m inwards to the back wall. Despite that tragic loss, this cave contains a unique record of humankind's early history in South Africa and was for that reason proclaimed as a National Heritage Site in 1993.