

THE FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN PASTORALISTS AND THE EARLY IRON AGE.

David PHILLIPSON, Museum of archaeology and anthropology,
Downing street, Cambridge CB2 3DZ, Royaume-Uni.

This paper will briefly discuss the archaeology of a part of Bantu Africa not covered by other contributions to this seminar. I have prepared it in order to keep in focus the huge area of Bantu settlement which lies in the eastern and southern parts of the continent.

Prior to the last millenium BC, the whole of Africa to the south of the equatorial forest appears to have been inhabited by people who lacked any knowledge of metals, of pottery, or of systematic food production, whether by the herding of domestic animals or by the cultivation of plants. Subsequently, there is now abundant archaeological evidence that the earliest farmers south of the forest were people with a coherent, integrated village-based life-style and a mixed farming economy, the emphasis of which varied - as one would expect - according to the opportunities and dictates of local environments (Phillipson 1989). I personally find that the protestations of scholars who deny the intimate link between the varied elements of this package as it occurred in most areas south of the forest become progressively less convincing as research advances. Undoubtedly, the factors were not originally linked, and they are attested independently of each other in several forest and more northerly areas: it is, however, as a combined package that they are first recognisable in the southern savanna. Let us note that the village/farming life-style south of the forest, with its accompanying pottery and metallurgical expertise, was in marked contrast with the economy and technology of the stone-tool-using hunter-gatherer peoples who preceded and, in some areas, co-existed with them. We now have sufficient data in many areas to view these developments in a broad, but specifically archaeological context. We can place the emphasis on economy and settlement rather than on artefact typology. I shall try to show that this approach permits a greatly improved understanding of the cultural processes involved in the inception of farming in southern Africa.

Much of this region differs from that further to the north-west in possessing environmental conditions which are often suitable for the herding of domestic animals on a substantial scale, and for the raising of cereals. This contrasts with the

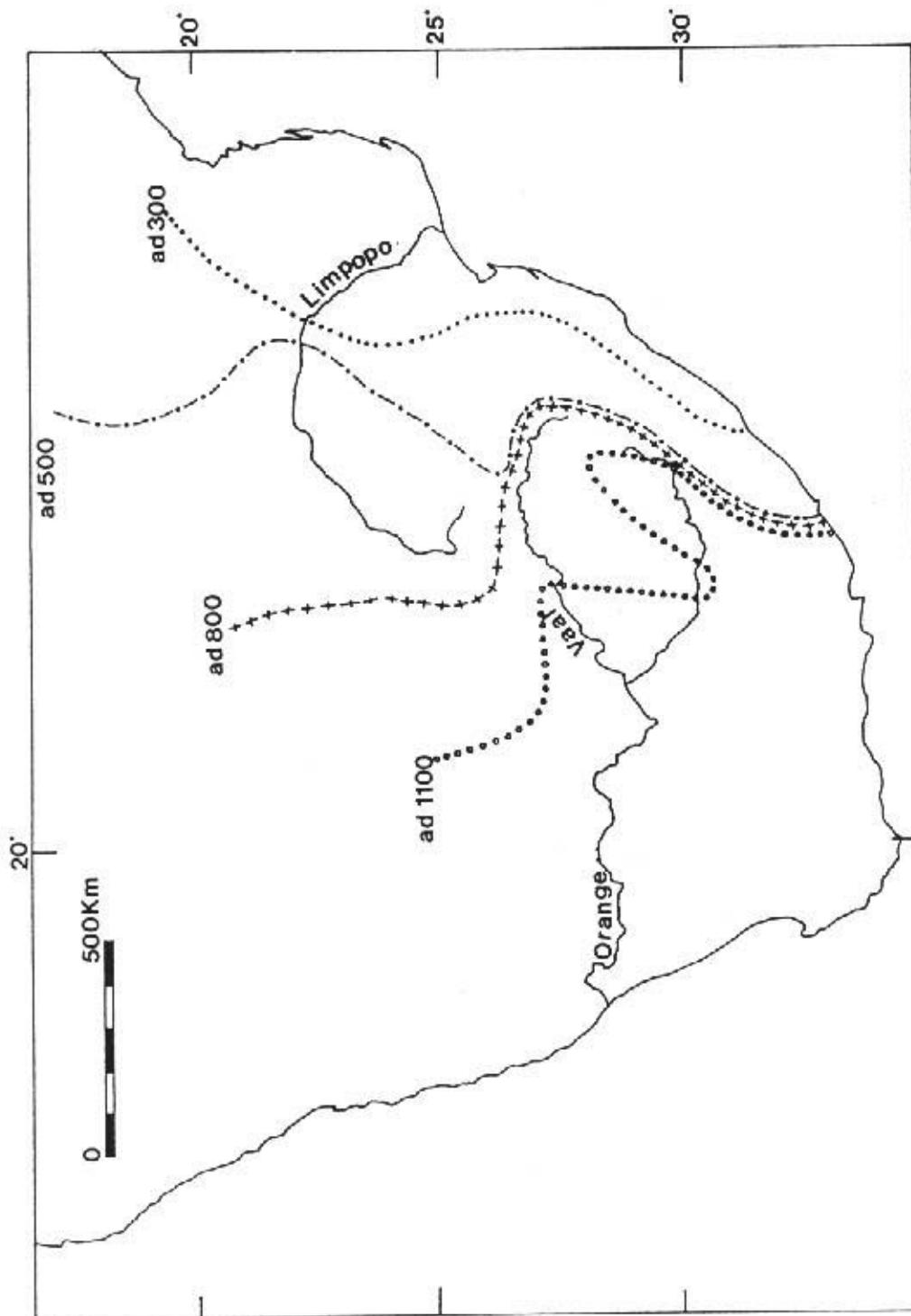


Fig.1: Map showing the approximate extent of Early Iron Age settlement in southern Africa at ad 300, ad 500 ad 800 and ad 1100.

concentration on propagation of root and other vegetable crops in the north-westerly regions.

Particular interest attaches to the beginning of the herding of domestic animals in southern Africa. In an earlier paper (Phillipson 1989) I have drawn attention to the contrast between the first village settlements in the eastern and central areas. In the relatively well watered east, mixed-farming societies supported both by cultivation and by herding were established from about the second century AD onwards. By contrast, the counterpart development in the more arid inland region took place more gradually; and settlements there were supported largely by the herding of domestic animals - predominantly cattle - from the second half of the first millenium AD. In both these regions the early farming settlements are attributed to the Early Iron Age.

There is one other group of people with access to domestic animals who are relevant to the present discussion. Sheep (and possibly cattle) were herded in south-westermost Africa from as long ago as the first century AD. Bones of domestic sheep (Klein 1984) have been recovered at several sites of this period in coastal regions of the western Cape Province of South Africa, associated with pottery that is clearly distinct from that of the Early Iron Age; the tools are exclusively of stone and bone, and there is no evidence for the working of iron. It is recognised that these occurrences pre-date by up to two centuries the first Early Iron Age settlement of South Africa - that of coastal Natal. They are some 400-500 years older than any substantial farming settlements currently known in more inland regions (fig.1). Since wild sheep are totally unknown in southern Africa, it must be assumed that the domestic animals were introduced from somewhere further north.

In recent years attention has again been focussed on the presence in over twenty rock-shelter sites in south-western Zimbabwe of the remarkable pottery known as Bambata ware (Robinson 1966). Similar pottery has now been reported from open-air sites in central Botswana (Denbow 1986). Despite confusion that has arisen from the extension of the term 'Bambata ware' to apply to other archaeological assemblages, it is clear that the original discoveries are markedly distinct in form, technology and style from the pottery that is found on the village sites of the early farmers. In 1981, further excavations at Bambata Cave in the Matopo Hills revealed sherds of Bambata ware associated with microlithic artefacts, bones of domestic sheep, and charcoal which has been dated to the third/second century BC (Walker 1983).

Several scholars have attributed great significance to this date, which is supported by another age-determination for similar pottery at the nearby site of Tshangula. This emphasis

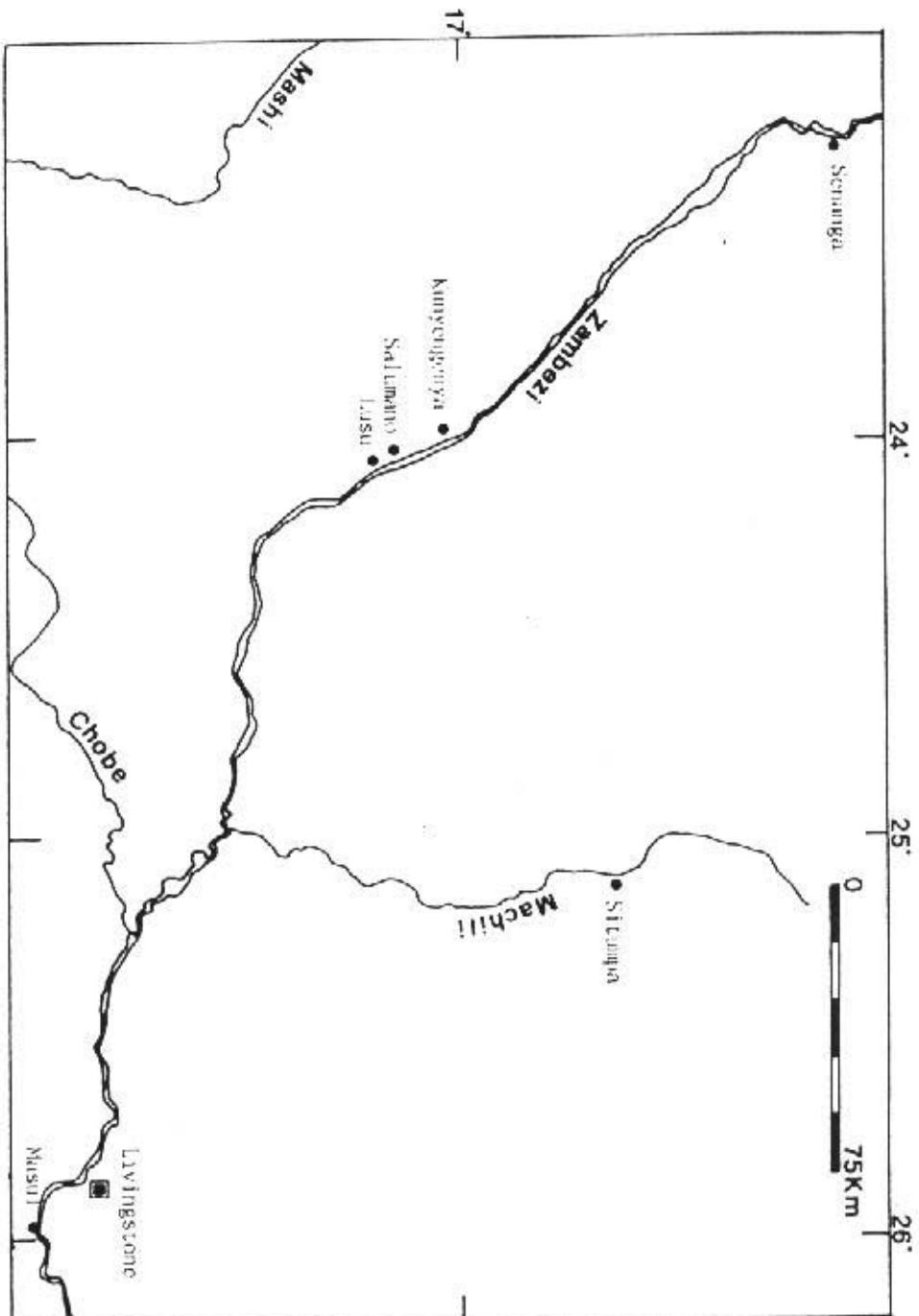


Fig.2: Distribution map of Sitompa ware sites in the upper Zambezi valley.

on the Bambata date for early domestic sheep has been stimulated by other arguments - not primarily archaeological - of researchers such as Ehret (1982) and Elphick (1985) that it may have been from an early centre in northern Botswana or adjacent south-western parts of Zimbabwe that domestic stock were by some means transmitted southwards to reach the south-western coastal regions of South Africa where they were herded, far beyond the territory of the metal-using mixed-farming peoples, by the very beginning of the Christian era. The suggestion has been made that the domestic animals, to have been present in southernmost Africa at such an early date, must have been derived from a source other than the metal-using farmers of the Early Iron Age. Walker's evidence from Bambata has been cited in support of this view.

In this context, I believe that research recently undertaken by the Zambia National Monuments Commission is highly relevant. Only preliminary reports have so far been published by the excavator, N.Katankwa, and I am very grateful for his permission to cite them here. Katankwa's (1981a; see also Vogel and Katankwa 1976) work in the upper Zambezi valley permits a reasonably clear Iron Age succession to be proposed where previously only isolated, poorly documented discoveries had been recorded, too disparate to provide a coherent pattern. In particular, we can now see that Desmond Clark's so-called Situmpa ware (Clark and Fagan 1965) does indeed represent a distinct and very early ceramic horizon. Almost identical pottery is now known from further work at Situmpa, at Lusu and from Kunyenganya (Phillipson 1968), as well as from several new sites along the Zambezi and its tributaries between Senanga and Sesheke (fig.2). The most significant of Katankwa's discoveries is the large multi-component site of Salumano, 30 kilometres upstream from Katima Kulilo. Here, the lowest horizon contains exclusively pottery of Situmpa type, apparently associated with bones of domestic cattle (Plug 1981). Two of these Situmpa ware occurrences are now dated by four radiocarbon analyses made by three laboratories (fig.3): an age in the last four centuries BC is very strongly indicated, with the mean date close to 200 BC (Katankwa 1981b).

It would be rash at this stage to offer detailed speculation about the affinities and associations of the Situmpa material. At least at Salumano it appears to belong with a clear village-horizon, albeit one of much smaller extent than its successors of the mid-first millennium AD. At Lusu, Situmpa pottery overlay an aceramic horizon with microlithic tools. Such tools have not been recovered in direct association with Situmpa pottery, although neither - so far - has evidence for the working of metal. Probably the closest typological and stylistic parallels for Situmpa pottery are with the earliest wares to the north and east, where they are associated with metal-working and with

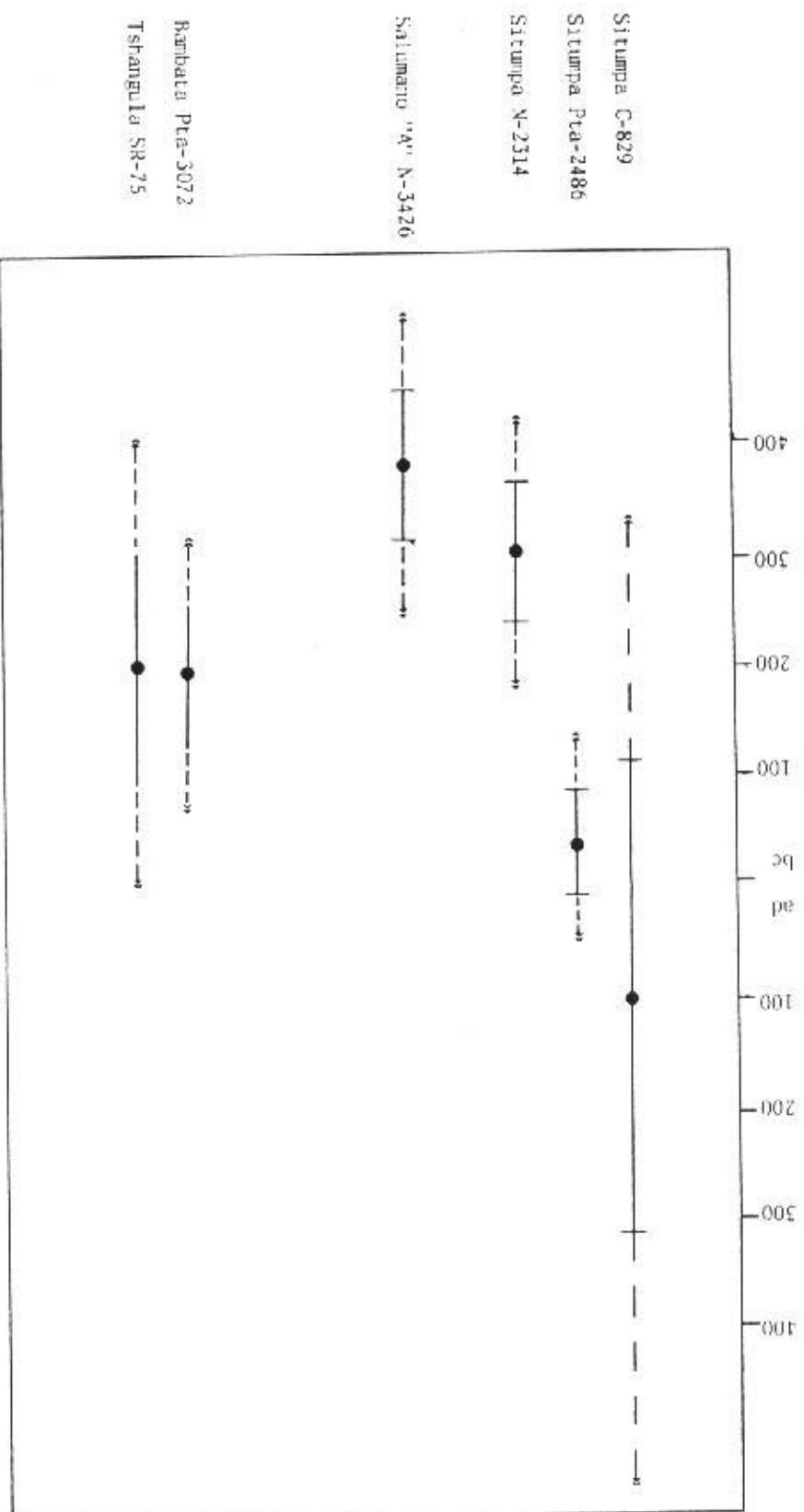


Fig. 3: Radiocarbon dates for Situmpa and Baribata pottery. The uncalibrated dates are shown to one (continuous line) and two (dotted line) standard deviations.

evidence for a mixed-farming economy.

These discoveries in the upper Zambezi valley strongly suggest that metal-using mixed-farming peoples were present in this part of Africa during the last few centuries BC. This is several hundred years earlier than the date proposed by most recent writers, and is at least as early as the age now indicated for Bambata ware in the Matopos, some 500 kilometres to the south-east. If future research confirms the picture that now seems to be emerging, our view of the introduction of domestic stock to south-western Africa becomes at once simpler and more coherent. There is no longer any need to postulate an archaeologically invisible pastoral population in south-central Africa before the establishment of the metal-using farmers. The latter are now seen to have been present in the sub-continent at a sufficiently early date to have served as the source of the sheep that were herded in south-westernmost Africa around the beginning of the Christian era.

In conclusion, I should like to make an observation on the international nature of archaeological research in Bantu Africa. My paper has drawn heavily on published accounts of work in South Africa, and incorporates results of my own observations in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Ideally, it should have included research also in parts of Namibia and Angola. I take this opportunity to thank all those archaeologists who have so kindly shown me their discoveries and discussed their implications with me.

Two points arise from this. One is that it is increasingly difficult for archaeologists employed in national institutions to work in neighbouring countries. There is thus a growing role to be played by international organisations such as CICIBA. The second point is that, in the regions of Bantu Africa with which this paper has been concerned, only a minority of countries are member-states of CICIBA. I urge that steps be taken to bring these countries - notably Zimbabwe, Botswana and (now) Namibia - into membership so as to facilitate a better and more comprehensive understanding of the archaeology of Bantu Africa as a whole.

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