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Feasting among Venda-speakers of South Africa: the Late Iron Age fauna from Mutokolwe

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ABSTRACT
Mutokolwe is located in the northern part of South Africa. The site was occupied by Venda-speaking farmers during the Late Iron Age. One of the most unusual aspects from this faunal assemblage is the presence of complete metapodia of cattle and sheep. No other faunal assemblage from farming sites in southern Africa contains as many complete specimens, including long bones, as that from Mutokolwe. Skeletal completeness is one of the signatures which signal feasting activities from the archaeological record. Feasting has been recognised in different parts of the world, including Africa. Based on ethnographic accounts, feasting was also common amongst Bantu-speaking farmers of southern Africa, and in particular, Venda-speakers. Taking into account limitations posed by archaeological, ethnography and early historical descriptions, we suggest that the complete long bones of livestock signal feasting activities at Mutokolwe. The faunal assemblage from the site contains an unusual high percentage of identifiable remains, indicating that it was likely subjected to biased sampling. Moreover, few wild animals are present in the assemblage, which suggests, sampling biases aside, that domestic animals were favoured in feasts possibly due to their association with people and ancestors.

KEY WORDS
Feasting,
Mutokolwe,
fauna,
cattle,
sheep,
Venda-speakers,
Late Iron Age.

Festins chez les locuteurs de venda en Afrique du Sud : la faune de Mutokolwe à la fin de l'Âge du Fer.
Mutokolwe est situé dans la partie nord de l'Afrique du Sud. À la fin de l'Âge du Fer, le site était occupé par les agriculteurs de langue venda. L'un des aspects les plus insolites de cet assemblage faunique est la présence de métapodes complets de bovins et d'ovins. Aucun autre assemblage faunique provenant de sites agricoles en Afrique australe ne contient autant de spécimens complets, y compris d'os longs, que celui de Mutokolwe. L'intégralité du squelette est l'un des indices archéologiques qui révèlent des activités festives. L'existence de festins a été reconnue dans différentes parties du monde, y compris l'Afrique. Selon des récits ethnographiques, les festins étaient aussi fréquents chez les agriculteurs de langue bantoue d'Afrique australe et, en particulier, chez les locuteurs de venda. Tenant compte des limites posées par les vestiges archéologiques, l'ethnographie et l'histoire ancienne, nous suggérons que l'ensemble des os longs d'animaux trouvés à Mutokolwe témoignent d'activités festives. L'assemblage du site contient un pourcentage inhabituellement élevé de restes identifiables, ce qui indique qu'il a probablement fait l'objet d'un échantillonnage biaisé. De plus, abstraction faite des biais d'échantillonnage, peu d'animaux sauvages sont présents dans l'assemblage, ce qui suggère que les animaux domestiques ont été favorisés dans les fêtes, probablement en raison de leur association à des personnes et ancêtres.

MOTS CLÉS
Festins,
Mutokolwe,
faune,
bovins,
ovins,
langue venda,
fin de l'Âge du Fer.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological studies on feasting are becoming more common throughout the world (e.g. Haggis 2007; Rosenswig 2007; Joyce & Henderson 2007; Hastorf 2008; Twiss 2008; Hayden 2009; Kuijt 2009; Duncan *et al.* 2009; Grimstead & Bayham 2010; Hayden & Villeneuve 2011; Knudson *et al.* 2012). However, few such studies have been undertaken in Africa (Sadr 2004; Badenhorst 2008; Fleisher 2010), in no small part due to the problem of recognising feasting in the archaeological record (e.g. Badenhorst 2008). Fortunately, there are numerous ethnographic and early historical descriptions of Bantu-speaking farmers from southern Africa, and these sources refer to feasting activities. While the process of social, economic and political changes in the last few centuries altered many of these cultures, they nevertheless remain useful sources of information for archaeologists. In this paper, we explore feasting amongst Venda-speakers, a Bantu-speaking group living in the northern parts of South Africa. We present the results of faunal analysis of Mutokolwe, a site dating from the Late Iron Age (Figs 1; 2). The site represents an early village occupied by Venda-speakers. Few archaeofaunas have been analysed and reported from sites ascribed to Venda-speakers (De Wet Bronner 1994a, b; 1995a, b; 1997; Antonites & Kruger 2012).

HISTORY OF VENDA-SPEAKERS

During the Holocene, southern Africa was occupied by San hunter-gatherers. The first farmers settled in southern Africa during the first millennium AD. These farmers spoke Bantu-languages. This period is called the Early Iron Age, and dates to between AD 200 and 900. Farmers introduced cultivated plants and domestic animals, including cattle (*Bos taurus* Linnaeus, 1758), sheep (*Ovis aries* Linnaeus, 1758), goats (*Capra hircus* Linnaeus, 1758), chickens (*Gallus gallus domesticus* (Linnaeus, 1758)) and dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris* (Linnaeus, 1758)) into the region. Caprines (sheep and goats collectively) are common during this time. People constructed wattle-and-daub structures, manufactured ceramics and used metal technology. Towards the end of the first millennium AD, a period called the Middle Iron Age (AD 900 to 1300), some settlements such as Mapungubwe Hill in the Limpopo Valley became incorporated in the wider trans-Indian Ocean trade network. Gold, ivory and other trade items were supplied by farmers on the Zimbabwe Plateau in exchange for imported goods such as glass beads. Great Zimbabwe and other states controlled these trade networks during the second millennium (Later Iron Age, AD 1300 to 1820s). Stone used for construction became widespread in southern Africa during the Late Iron Age. The Late Iron Age is associated with the arrival of ancestral Sotho-Tswana-, Nguni-, and Venda-speakers in southern Africa. These are all variants of Bantu-languages. European contact post-dates AD 1488, and historical and ethnographic sources indicate the dominant role of cattle in the social life of farmers during the Late Iron Age. Eastern Bantu-speakers of southern Africa used cattle in ceremonies, bride wealth payments and exchange (e.g. Schapera 1953a; Mitchell 2002; Huffman 2007; Badenhorst 2010).

Venda-speakers live north of the Soutpansberg Mountains in the Limpopo province of South Africa (Loubser 1989: 54). Oral traditions suggest that they once lived in south-western Mozambique and north-eastern Botswana. However, little remains known about Venda-speakers as they prohibited missionaries or early Europeans to live amongst them until about 1872 (Gottschling 1905). One of the earliest in-depth descriptions of Venda-speakers is by Beuster (1879), and there were several later studies (e.g. Gründler 1899; Gottschling 1905; Wessmann 1908; Lestrade 1927; Stayt 1931; Van Warmelo 1932; Motenda 1940; Mudau 1940). However, as Loubser

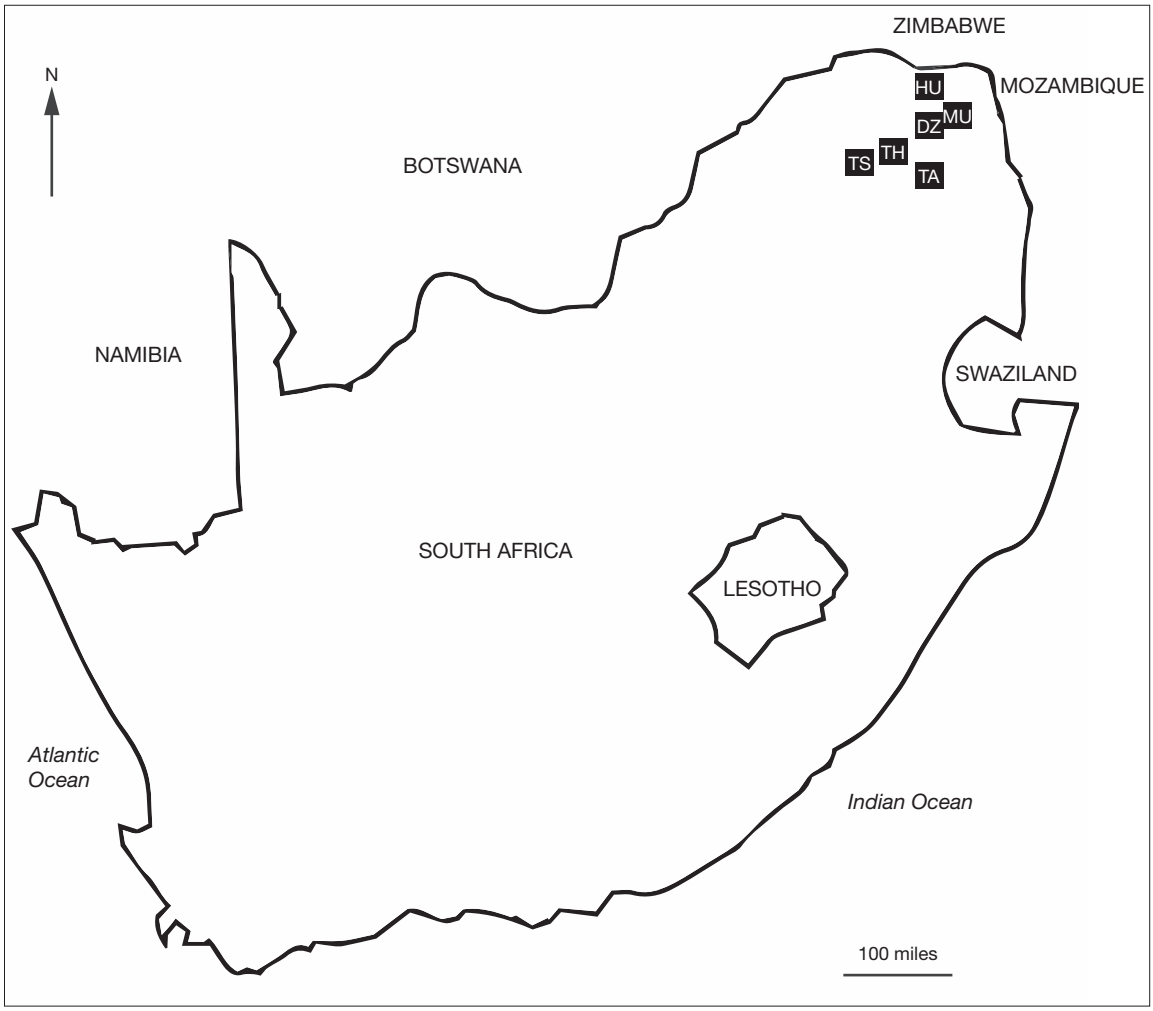

Fig. 1. — Location of the study areas in north-eastern South Africa: **DZ**, Dzata; **HU**, Ha-Tshirundu; **MU**, Mutokolwe; **TA**, Tavhatshena; **TH**, Tshirululuni; **TS**, Tshitheme.

(1988: 61; 1991) pointed out, these descriptions emphasise the history of one ruling clan, the Singo, and largely ignored other clans. The arrival of the Singo in South Africa, dated to around AD 1750, led early ethnographers to assume that this represents the earliest arrival of all Venda-speakers in South Africa (Hanisch 1994), when, on the contrary, they arrived some centuries earlier.

The Venda-language, according to Van Warmelo (1974), is reminiscent of both Sotho and Karanga, and some linguists have classified the Venda language as North-Eastern Sotho (Murdock 1959: 386). However, it is the culture of Venda-speakers which separates them from other Bantu-speaking groups in southern Africa, as they practice certain customs alien to surrounding Shona, Sotho-Tswana and Tsonga communities (Schapera 1953b: 63).

Following archaeological research in the latter half of the 20th century, new insights were obtained on Venda-speakers. It was suggested that their origin extends further back into the mid-second millennium AD (Hanisch 1994: 69). For example, some have argued that ceramics associated with Venda-speakers (identified archaeologically as Letaba ware) are an amalgamation of Kalanga (identified with Khami ceramics) and Sotho-Tswana (who made Moloko ceramics), reflecting the unification of these two languages into Venda (e.g. Huffman & Hanisch 1987: 23; Huffman 2012). Letaba ceramics appear around AD 1550 (Loubser 1989; Huffman 2007). On the basis of this evidence, it is now accepted that the origins of Venda-speakers south of the Limpopo River dates prior to the arrival of the Singo ruling clan (Loubser 1992).

FEASTING

Animal and plants are far more than just sources of food (Phillipson 1993). Food also plays a major role in religious affairs, and forms an important basis for social, political and economic developments. While there are different definitions for feasting (Dietler & Hayden 2001; Wright 2004; Hayden & Villeneuve 2011), in essence they represent communal consumption of food and/or drink (Dietler & Hayden 2001) in small or larger groups (Twiss 2008).

The display of social status or power is also common at feasts (Van der Veen 2003: 413, 414; Hastorf 2008). Feasting includes the use of special locations, consumption of large amount of food and/or drinks, a variety of special foods that are rarely eaten, food wastage, use of special serving paraphernalia, public rituals and performances, display of commemorative items and/or destroying of prestige items, culinary emphasis on large animals and consumption of domesticated animals (Hayden 1998: 137; Twiss 2008: 419; Hayden 2009). Domestic animals, which require intensive labour to maintain, are often used for feasting purposes (Hayden 1998: 138; Spielmann 2002: 197). Ethnographic and historical information are important for identifying ancient feasting in the archaeological record (Dietler 2001: 88).

There are benefits to feasting. These are: mobilisation of labour; creation of cooperative relationships within groups, exclusion of other groups; creation of cooperative alliances between social groups; investing surpluses and generating profits; attracting desirable mates; creating political power; extracting surplus produce from the public; soliciting favours; and compensating for transgressions (Hayden 2001: 29, 30). The setting of feasts is designed to lure people to participate. The goods used are often the rarest delicacies, sweetest, richest, largest, the most difficult to procure, or those that require intensive labour to produce and prepare. These are intended to indebt guests (Hayden 1998).

Recognising feasting in the archaeological record is challenging, as other behaviours may mimic feasting activities. Some archaeological signatures of feasting include: food remains; preparation and serving vessels; food-preparation facilities; special food-disposal dumps; feasting facilities and other special locations; associated prestige items; ritualised items of etiquette; paraphernalia for public rituals; existence of aggrandisers; recordkeeping devices; pictorial and written records of feasting; food-storage facilities; and resource characteristics. Of these, faunal signatures include: the presence of rare or labour-intensive animal taxa, which could include domestic animals and difficult-to-obtain hunted animals; the quantity of food as reflected in bone waste; evidence for waste of food such as the deposition of articulated joints and unprocessed bone; bone dumps in special food-disposal features; prestige items such as shells; a high number of storage facilities at sites; and abundance and intense exploitation of certain species (Hayden 2001: 40, 41).

From a zooarchaeological perspective, recognising feasting in the archaeological record will always remain challenging (LeCount 2001: 935). For example, sampling and the scale of excavations would influence recovered materials (Twiss 2008). Feasting paraphernalia may also not survive. An interesting practice highlighting this issue comes from the Zulu of South Africa. After feasts, the host collects all the bones and burns them. The ash from these bones is then dispersed in the cattle enclosure, while the skull and/or the horns are displayed in the village. Such burning of bones is to avoid bad spells which might be imposed to the family by witches or sorceress (Lambert 1993; Mnguni 2006).

FEASTING AMONG VENDA-SPEAKERS

Notwithstanding the limitations of recognising feasting in the archaeological record, ethnographic and historical evidence of feasting has been recorded world-wide (Adams 2004), including amongst Bantu-speakers of South Africa (Hammond-Tooke 1974), and in particular, Venda-speakers. We next present an overview of feasting and consumption activities amongst Venda-speakers as described in ethnographic sources. Our aim is to illustrate that there are examples of feasting amongst Venda-speakers in ethnographic sources, and that such activities in whatever form, likely date back in time in a similar or changed form.

According to Stayt (1931), the Venda hold their cattle in very high regard. They view them more as sources of wealth than a means of livelihood, and generally, all cattle have their own names. Richer people gain prestige by possessing large herds of cattle. The chief and other elites often kill a beast for feasting. An honored guest is given a parade of animals so that he may choose the beast he favours (Stayt 1931). After an animal is killed and before feasting begins, certain parts are designated for selected people. For example, a hind-leg is given to the chief, while the other leg and the head are presented to the owner's father. The neck is given to his maternal uncle, while the paternal uncle receives one fore-leg. The intestines, chest, stomach and udder are believed to be related to the mother and son, hence, they are given to his mother. Meat from the ribs to the thigh is considered the finest. These are shared between the paternal aunt and the chief's wife, each receiving either side. Kidneys are offered to his maternal grandmother, or paternal grandmother. Cattle-herders are given the tail and all the hoofs, and meat surrounding the lungs and heart. The liver belongs to the owner's children. Whoever prepares the skin receives the hump. The remainder of the meat belongs to the owner, who divides it among his relatives. At times the owner is left with no meat (Stayt 1931).

According to Stayt (1931), when a chief dies, people are summoned to the *khoro*, a public meeting place where visitors are met and court meetings, dances, and other social events are held (Huffman 1996), to partake in the *tshikona* (commemorative, reed flute dance). Before the dance begins, a cow is killed and roasted. People are compelled to shave their hair and beards, so that everything starts afresh with the new chief. The installation of a chief entails a ceremony which involves feasting and dancing for months. During this period, about 50 cattle may be slaughtered, and all neighbouring people of importance visit the new chief and bestow him with gifts. Gifts could include cattle, goats, sheep and at times, wives. In the past, a new chief was given one cow by each household (Stayt 1931).

Kirby (1956) witnessed the construction of the new chief's residence after the death of the predecessor. In Venda custom, a new chief has to build his own residence upon installation (see also Wilson 1969). According to Kirby (1956), Chief Tshivhase summoned hundreds of men from each village to help with the construction of his new residence. Kirby (1956) pointed out that after breakfast and before dinner there was

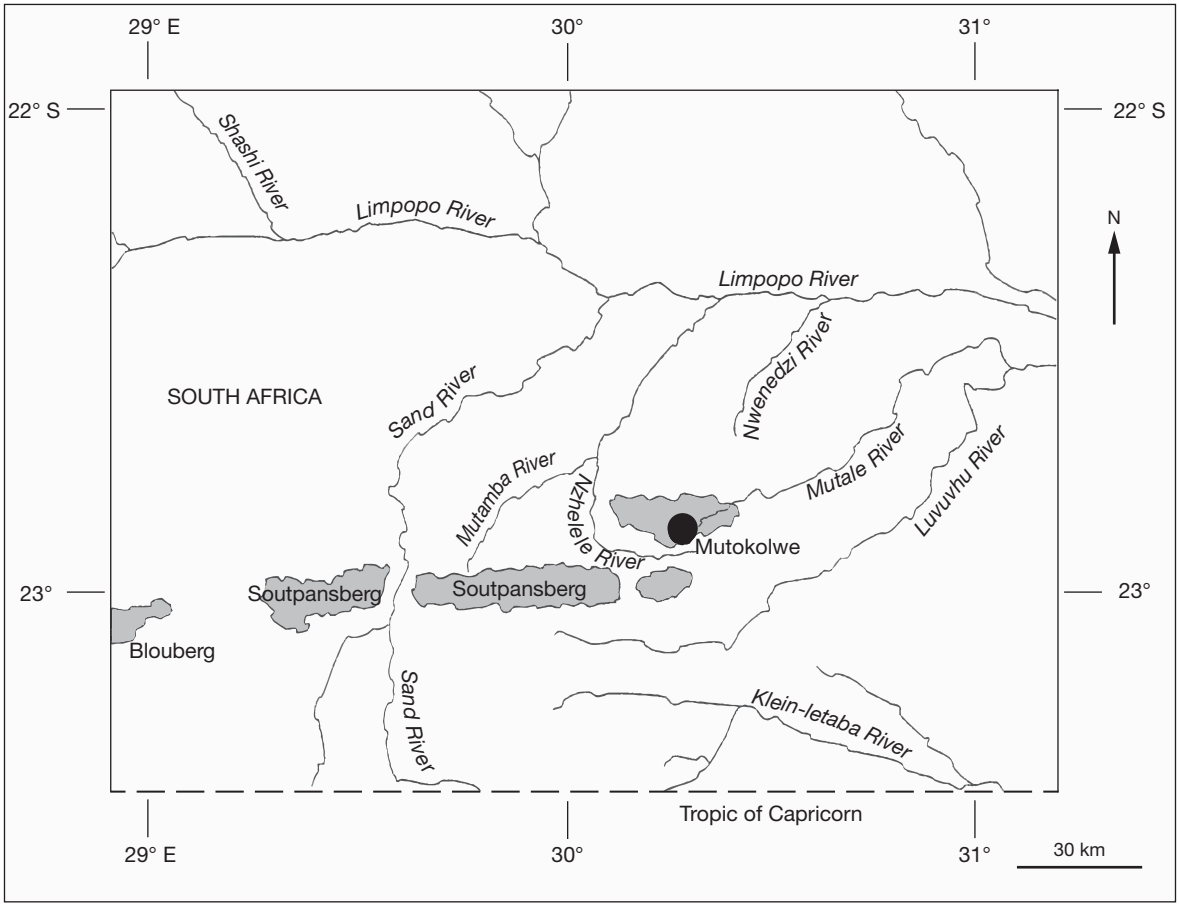

FIG. 2. — Location of Mutokolwe and other sites mentioned in the text within South Africa (adapted from Fish [2000:71], and used with permission from the University of the Witwatersrand).

a performance of *tshikona* by the men who came to provide assistance. Although a *tshikona* could be accomplished by about 25 men, over three hundred men were involved in the execution of that particular dance. To appease the helpers and demonstrate his sovereignty, the chief would have to slaughter several domestic animals for feasting purposes.

Venda-speakers have a strong and well-developed system of justice. Depending on the offence, court fines are levied in the form of a goat, a sheep, or cattle. For example, adultery is punishable by a minimum of two heads of cattle, of which one is always killed and eaten publicly at the *khoro*. The sharing of this meal is important, since it symbolizes reparation of the crime and the readmission of the criminal into society. Other cattle are given to the aggrieved party and should be killed and eaten by his relatives at his home. Other crimes whose punishment is payable in the form of cattle are damage to property, assault, theft and arson. Deliberate arson is punishable by no less than ten heads of cattle and ten goats. In all these crimes, one beast is killed and consumed at the *khoro*. If the offender is poor, he either becomes indentured to the chief, or his wife is returned to her parents, and the bride wealth paid for her is given to the injured party (Stayt 1931). Crimes such as witchcraft, murder, homicide and incest are punished by death. According to Wessmann (1908), after such a death, the entire family, including livestock, children and women, is confiscated to the benefit of the chief. When those children get married, the chief receives more cattle.

MUTOKOLWE

Mutokolwe (often called Mutokolwe B) is located along the Soutpansberg Mountains in the Limpopo province of South Africa (Magoma 2014). The Tshiendeulu-Kwevho group claim they built Mutokolwe, and their descendants still protect the site (Loubser 1989: 5). Mutokolwe has been investigated by anthropologists (Van Warmelo 1940; Mudau & Motenda 1958; Ralushai 1977; Van Heerden & Mudau 2009) and archaeologists (Huffman & Hanisch 1987; Loubser 1989; Fish 2000). Huffman & Hanisch (1987) suggested that Mutokolwe was occupied by a senior chief with approximately 1000 to 2000 people residing in and around the capital (Huffman 2000, 2007).

The only excavations at Mutokolwe was done by Fish (2000), revealing an audience chamber, a beer drinking hut, a cooking hut, and *nefhasi's* office (Fish 2000; Fig. 3). *Nefhasi* or 'master of the ground' was an official along with *khotsimunene* (father's younger brother) who was engaged for legal matters in court. In the absence of *khotsimunene,* he could also act as a judge.

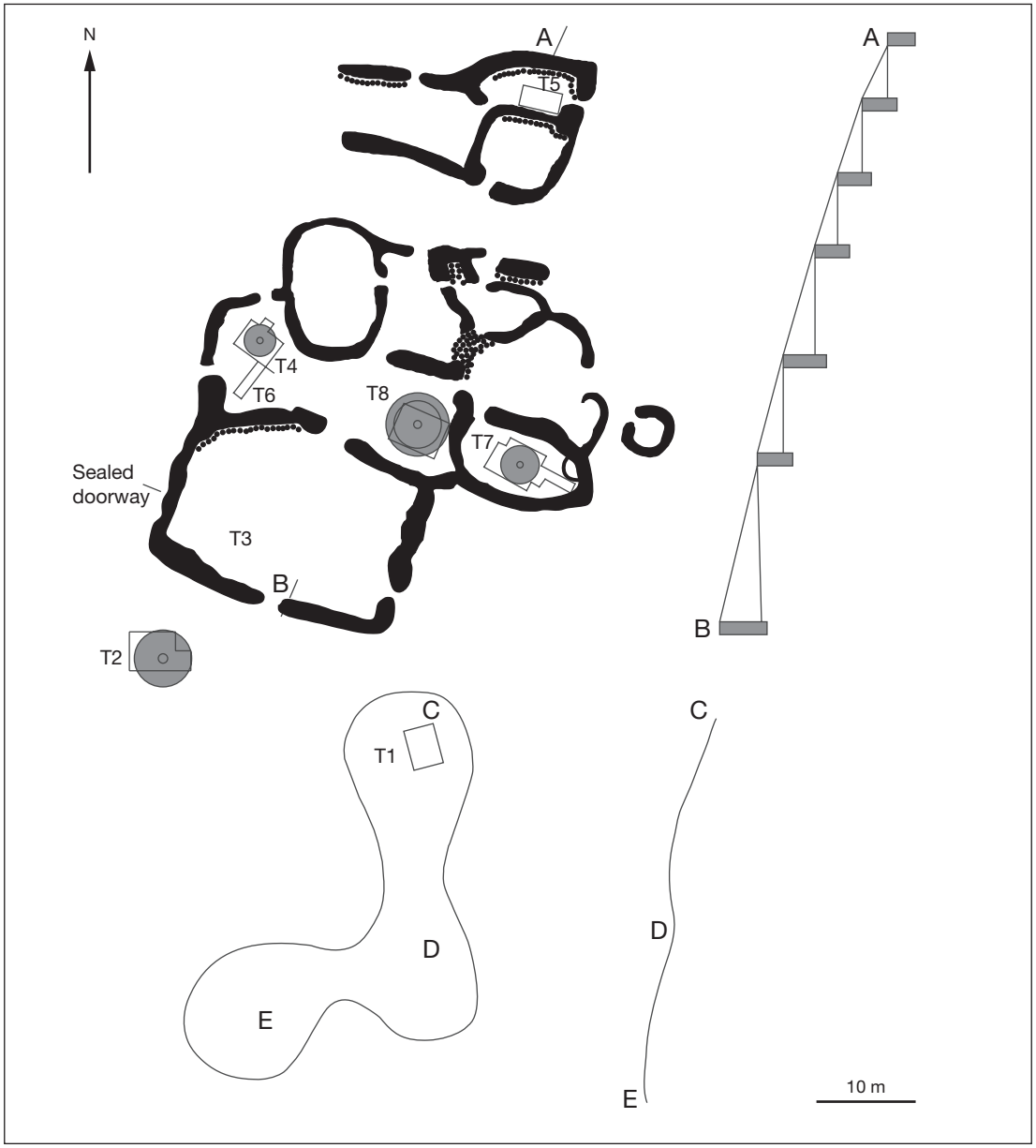

FIG. 3. — Excavations of Mutokolwe (from Fish [2000:74]; used with permission from the University of the Witwatersrand): **A**-**E**, slope of the topography; **T1**-**T8**, various testpits.

His other responsibility was being in charge of the distribution of meat and beer during feasts or assemblies. He also had free access to the ruler (Huffman 1996).

Fauna was retrieved from Trench I, excavated in a midden. It measured 3 × 4 metres, and was excavated using arbitrary layers of ten centimetres, reaching a maximum depth of two metres. The deposits were screened through a two millimetres mesh (Fish 2000). Mutokolwe dates to between AD 1450 and AD 1550. Khami pottery (Huffman & Hanisch 1987), spindle whorls, copper and iron bangles, shell, ivory bangle fragments, and glass and land snail beads were also found (Fish 2000).

The fauna was analysed using the method suggested by Driver (2005). According to this method, a specimen is considered 'identifiable' only if the element (e.g. humerus, femur, tibia) can be determined. Indeterminate bovid remains from the assemblage were grouped into size categories, following Brain (1974). Owing to the problems associated with the Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI; e.g. Plug & Plug 1990), only the Number of Identified Specimens (NISP) is used to quantify the faunal remains. More information on the measurements and taphonomy of the faunal assemblage is presented elsewhere (Magoma 2014).

RESULTS

The total faunal assemblage from Mutokolwe yielded 1344 specimens (Table 1), of which almost all (1338 or 99%) were identified. Only six (1%) specimens were unidentifiable.

TABLE 1. — Taxa represented at Mutokolwe B (NISP).

Domestic Taxa	Common Name	NISP
Capra hircus Linnaeus, 1758	Goat	2
Ovis aries Linnaeus, 1758	Sheep	70
cf. *Ovis aries*	Possible sheep	10
Ovis/Capra	Sheep/goat	297
cf. *Ovis/Capra*	Possible sheep/goat	11
Bos taurus Linnaeus, 1758	Cattle	519
cf. *Bos taurus*	Possible cattle	29
Wild Taxa	**Common Name**	**NISP**
Papio ursinus Kerr, 1792	Baboon	7
Procavia capensis Pallas, 1766	Rock hyrax	8
Raphicerus campestris Thunberg, 1811	Steenbok	7
Lepus sp. Linnaeus, 1758	Hare	5
Indeterminate Taxa	**Common Name**	**NISP**
Carnivora small	Indeterminate small carnivore	1
Carnivora medium	Indeterminate medium carnivore	1
Bovidae I	Indeterminate small bovid	4
Bovidae II	Indeterminate medium bovid	84
Bovidae III	Indeterminate large bovid	235
Mammalia medium	Indeterminate medium mammal	7
Mammalia large	Indeterminate large mammal	41
Total		**1338**

Cattle are the best represented taxon, followed by caprines (sheep and goats collectively). The only wild animals include steenbok (*Raphicerus campestris* (Thunberg, 1811)), baboon (*Papio ursinus* (Kerr, 1792)), rock hyrax (*Procavia capensis* (Pallas, 1766)) and hare (*Lepus* sp.). The indeterminate medium and large Bovidae and Mammals are likely caprines and cattle respectively.

One of the most unusual and intriguing aspects of the faunal assemblage from Mutokolwe is the presence of some complete elements of cattle and sheep. These include: five metatarsals; eight metacarpals; two mandibles; one scapula; one patella; 17 carpals; 28 tarsals; two sesamoids; and 107 phalanges, all of cattle (Fig. 4). Complete elements of sheep include: eight metacarpals; one metatarsal; one humerus; six astragali; and seven phalanges. In addition, complete elements of caprines include: one mandible; two patella; and nine calcanea. These remains are not discrete burials of livestock, but were found in various layers of the trench, suggesting multiple depositional events. Skeletal part representation for medium and large Bovidae indicate that the lower leg bones of cattle are very well represented in the assemblage (Table 2; Fig. 5). Teeth are also well common.

FIG. 4. — An example of a complete cattle metacarpal from Mutokolwe. Scale-bar: 10 cm.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Complete long bones, especially larger elements such as metapodia, are exceptionally rare in faunal assemblages from farming sites in southern Africa (e.g. Plug 1988; Badenhorst & Plug 2011). No other site occupied by Venda-speakers contained such evidence either (De Wet Bronner 1994a, b; 1995a, b; Antonites & Kruger 2012). An exception is Mapungubwe Hill however, dating to the Middle Iron Age. At this site, Voigt (1983) reported three well-preserved cattle metapodia, one of which is a complete metacarpal. Apart from the Mapungubwe Hill specimens, no other farming site dated to between AD 200 and the 1820's yielded as many complete cattle and caprine specimens in southern Africa, despite the analyses of numerous faunal assemblages. This makes the faunal composition of Mutokolwe unique.

While it remains ambiguous to identify feasting from zooarchaeological remains, descriptions of communal consumption events in ethnographies of Venda-speakers make it plausible

Table 2. — Bovidae skeletal part representation (NISP).

Element	Caprines, medium Bovidae and medium Mammals	Cattle, large Bovidae and large Mammals
Crania (skull mandible, teeth)	285	386
Axial (vertebrae and ribs)	12	97
Upper front limb (scapula, humerus, radius, ulna)	64	51
Lower front limb (carpals, metacarpals)	28	34
Upper hind limb (pelvis, femur, patella, tibia)	54	67
Lower hind limb (tarsals, metatarsal)	40	55
Lower limbs (sesamoids, phalanges)	8	121
Total	**491**	**811**

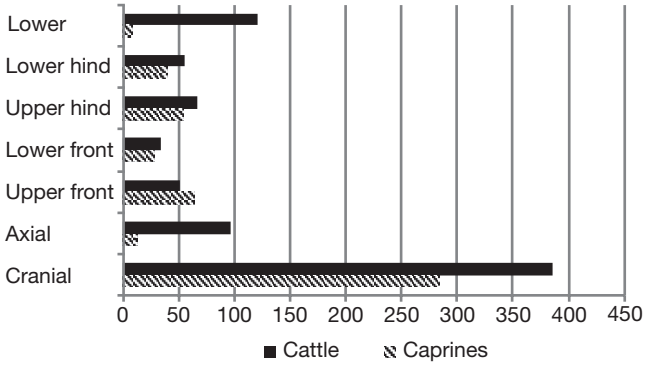

Fig. 5. — Bovid skeletal part representation (NISP).

that feasting occurred at Mutokolwe. The most suggestive evidence for feasting at Mutokolwe is the presence of complete long bones such as metapodia of livestock, which often signal feasting (e.g. Hayden 2001; Twiss 2008). Complete elements of livestock indicate wasting and not normal subsistence patterns. While animal remains from burials are often complete (e.g. Muir & Driver 2004), the remains from Mutokolwe are not from burials. The remains were recovered from a midden, occurring throughout the layers, along with other artefacts.

In other parts of Africa such as the Sudan, several thousand kilometres in the north of Africa, the presence of lower legs bones such as metapodia is considered waste due to their low nutritional value (e.g. Chaix & Sidi-Maamar 1992; Arnold & Lyons 2011). However, no such practices are known from farming communities in southern Africa. Larger long bones are usually preferred for the extraction of marrow by both humans and carnivores (Lyman 2008: 34), and it is clear that the inhabitants of Mutokolwe did not extract marrow from long bones. There is most often evidence of carnivore chew marks on bone remains from Late Iron Age assemblages in southern Africa (e.g. Plug 1996; Plug & Badenhorst 2006) since dogs are present in the region from the first millennium AD (Plug 2000). At Mutokolwe, carnivore damage is visible on 10% (n = 134) of the total assemblage. The damage was likely caused by dogs kept by the inhabitants, since it is unlikely that wild carnivores would enter a settled village to scavenge bone remains. This suggests that inhabitants at Mutokolwe deliberately kept dogs from chewing on some of the cattle and sheep carcasses, or depositing them quickly, leaving many long bones complete.

The dominance of cattle in the assemblage further suggests feasting, since domestic animals were often used for feasts (Hayden 1998: 138; Spielmann 2002: 197; Hayden 2009). Other sites ascribed to Venda-speakers also contain numerous cattle remains (Table 3), but in lower proportions. This could partially be the result of the likely biased sampling (see below). Nevertheless, Stayt (1931) noted that cattle were of social, political and economic value to Venda-speakers. In times past, only chiefs and important people owned cattle, suggesting that Mutokolwe was probably inhabited by a person of high status, most probably a chief.

Almost all specimens could be identified from the Mutokolwe assemblage, which is extremely unusual for farming sites from southern Africa (Plug 1988; Badenhorst & Plug 2011). Other sites ascribed to Venda-speakers indicate that unidentified specimens are found in large proportions, ranging between 75% and 91% for the total assemblage size (Table 3). Notwithstanding differences in analytical methodology (Magoma 2014), the sample containing 99% identified specimens from Mutokolwe most certainly indicates pre-selected before analysis. A large proportion of the fauna was therefore not considered. A similar pattern was observed at Simunya in Swaziland, where selective hand picking of bones and teeth during excavation resulted in an unusually high proportion of identified specimens (Badenhorst & Plug 2002). Despite the likely biased faunal assemblage from Mutokolwe, it does not preclude the suggestion that the complete metapodia indicate feasting activities.

Only a few isolated specimens of wild animals are present in the Mutokolwe assemblage, namely rock hyrax, steenbok, baboon and hare. Inhabitants of Mutokolwe hunted these small game while some animals such as baboons could have been killed as pests in fields (Badenhorst *et al.* 2016). At other sites associated with Venda-speakers, domestic animals also outnumber game animals (De Wet Bronner 1994a, b; 1995a, b; Antonites & Kruger 2012). However, the proportions of wild animals are larger in these assemblages compared to Mutokolwe (Magoma 2014). While ethnographies of Venda-speakers refer to hunting activities (Stayt 1931: 78; Van Warmelo 1940), the low representation of game could either be due to the sampling bias which led to the loss of remains of smaller wild animals, or that hunting was not considered important. Wild animals may not have been considered suitable for feasting. The association of livestock with people and ancestors (cf. Goepfert 2010) could have made them more preferable offerings for feasting at Mutokolwe.

TABLE 3. — Faunal composition of assemblages at Late Iron Age sites ascribed to Venda-speakers (data from Plug 2000; Antonites & Kruger 2012).

Site	Relative date	% identified specimens	% unidentified specimens	% cattle NISP	% wild NISP
Mutokolwe	AD 1450-1550	99	1	95	5
Dzata	AD 1700	9	91	43	57
Tavhatshena	AD 1580	25	75	73	27
Tshirululuni	AD 1670-1830	19	81	76	24
Tshitheme	AD 1740	9	91	59	41
Ha-Tshirundu	19th century	10	90	Data not available	Data not available

CONCLUSION

Our paper contributes to the emerging discussion in Africa on the subject of feasting and its archaeological interpretations. Although we borrow heavily from ethnography to interpret the fauna from Mutokolwe, we recognise the need for diachronic perspectives on the subject of feasting, to determine how it emerged in southern Africa, and changed over time. There is considerable potential here in studying faunal assemblages recovered from domestic contexts to understand rituals and ceremonies associated with evidently very sumptuous consumption of meals. Beyond these domestic contexts, including chiefly places such as Mutokolwe and related sites in northern South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe, there is need to re-think the faunal remains associated with burials. Rituals and ceremonies associated with royal courts, as well as the burial of the dead, always encouraged public consumption of meals often accompanied by entertainment, or the sharing of special food by two or more people for special events (Hayden & Villeneuve 2011). Going back to the emergence of food production in the region, the keeping of livestock and the growing of millets and sorghum must have created surpluses (Hayden 2009), which encouraged feasting during certain occasions. A re-interpretation of some of the faunal evidence recovered from the archaeological past (Thorp 1995), may offer new insights into the subject. Our current study focussed only on faunal remains in the absence of other clear evidence for feasting from other lines of evidence (e.g. Hayden 1990, 2001; Potter 1997; Twiss 2008; Pollock 2012). However, such finds may still be found, and require more research.

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