

A RICH STONE-WALLED HERITAGE ON VERLORENKLOOF ESTATE

Bokoni sites to visit:

Boomplaas rock engraving site Contact: The **Lydenburg Museum** tel 013 235 2213 or email jcelliers@thabachweumun.org.za

Gustav Klingbiel reserve Contact: The **Lydenburg Museum** tel 013 235 2213 or email jcelliers@thabachweumun.org.za

Komati Gorge Reserve: Contact tel 017-843 3920 / 017-843 3904 or email komatigorge@telkomsa.net

Kranskloof Hiking trail: Contact tel 0861 522262 or email bookings@jacanacollection.co.za

Verlorenkloof Estate: Contact tel. 013 256 9314/5 or email heidi@verlorenkloof.co.za or natalie@verlorenkloof.co.za

Further reading

Delius, P. & Schoeman, M.H. 2008. Revisiting Bokoni: populating the stone ruins of the Mpumalanga Escarpment. In Swanepoel, N., Esterhuysen, A., Bonner, P. (eds) *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African precedents and prospects*, 500 Years Initiative 2007 Conference Proceedings: 135-167. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Maggs, T. 2008. The Mpumalanga Escarpment settlements: some answers, many questions. In Swanepoel, N., Esterhuysen, A., Bonner, P. (eds) *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African precedents and prospects*, 500 Years Initiative 2007 Conference Proceedings: 169-181.

Delius, P., Maggs, T. & Schoeman, M.H. 2012. Old Structures New Paradigms 'Rethinking Pre-Colonial Society from the Perspective of the Stone-Walled Sites in Mpumalanga. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38(2):399-414.

Acknowledgments

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Engraving images: T. Wangemann.

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Verlorenkloof Estate is home to a rich stone-walled heritage legacy. Many stone-walled homesteads with cattle tracks and terraces mark its sloping hills.

These stonewalled sites formed part of Bokoni, a pre-colonial society that controlled about 20 000 km² of the Mpumalanga escarpment. This society lasted for approximately 500 years, and underwent a series of transformations during this period.

Two of these phases are visible on Verlorenkloof. The spectacular terrace architecture and distribution of the open air stonewalled sites suggests that these sites belonged to the second phase of the Bokoni sequence, when the Bokoni economy focussed on intensive agricultural production. The sites in the steep and forested 'Verlorenkloof', itself, however were occupied during the later times of trouble.

WHERE IS BOKONI?

The region between Orighstad and Carolina in Mpumalanga, South Africa is home to a unique archaeological stone building complex. The core elements of this tradition are stone-walled enclosures, roads and terraces. A combination of these features occurs on most sites, particularly the larger ones.



The individual sites range from simple enclosures, which consist of the two concentric stonewalled circles found in isolated small settlements, to complex sites with large central enclosures which have smaller enclosures attached to their outer walls. Rock art in the region depicts the full range of settlement patterns. Research by the Bokoni team has shown that it is likely that these complex and simple ruins are related to different stages in the developmental cycle of homesteads. A newly established homestead would have fewer people living in it, and own fewer cattle than the homestead of a very senior member of society.



PHASE 4



Some of the scattered people of Bokoni returned to their old homes when the troubles ended, but these occupations were mere shadows of the former Bokoni; and these communities eventually had to accept Boer authority. Others were eventually absorbed into neighbouring African societies that gave them refuge; and some remained on the margins and maintained a degree of autonomy from both sets of rulers.



One of the best documented of the groups of Bokoni scatterlings found refuge at the Berlin Mission station, Botshabelo. Here they encountered Dinkwanyane, a Christian member of the Pedi royal family who played a key leadership role at Botshabelo. The Koni group were led by Chief Phassoane, who grew up in a Bokoni village located near the Elands River. When Dinkoanyane became dissatisfied with the political processes at Botshabelo, Phassoane suggested that they move to his childhood home. This move was blocked by the Landrost but they still left the mission station, and a community under Dinkwanyane's leadership established Mafolofolo at another Bokoni refuge site near the Spekboom River, north of Lydenburg.

Mafolofolo was developed into a formidable fortress and is one example of a much wider trend in the second half of the nineteenth century when the stone walling techniques developed by the Koni came to influence the development of large-scale and extremely effective mountainous strongholds. These included the capitals of the Pedi, Kopa, Ndzundza Ndebele and Pulana.



PHASE 3

During this initial part of Phase 3 people probably used kloofs as refuges while continuing their traditional open valley occupations, but eventually conflict escalated and made this impossible. This conflict stemmed from three sources, the expanding Pedi Kingdom started to place pressure on Bokoni, Maroteng succession battles, and the expansion of aggressive states including the Ndwandwe under Zwile and the 'Ndebele' led by Mzilikazi into this region from the South.

The refuge sites, however, did not provide sustainable long term refuge, and people scattered. Many of the refugees did not leave archaeological or oral evidence, but oral accounts record that many were taken captive, a few chiefdoms and or fragments of chiefdoms moved further north, some joined the Ndzundza Ndebele, while others took refuge in rugged areas such as the mountains in northern Bokoni.

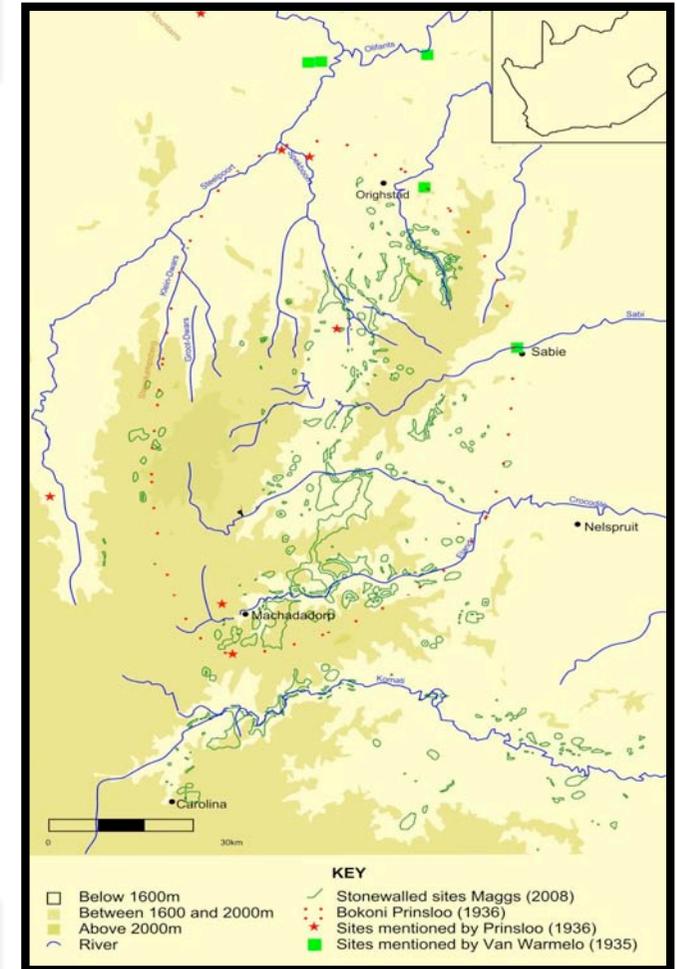
Once the conflict subsided, a process of political regrouping began which culminated in the emergence of a new chiefdom led by a Bokoni commoner, Marangrang, in the late 1820s. He soon embarked on an aggressive expansion of the area under his control from his base near Lydenburg, probably Khutwaneng, an earlier stronghold marked by intensive terracing. Later Marangrang moved to the Dwars River, which contains several intensively terraced sites. His expansionist policies, however, brought him into conflict with the re-established Pedi polity, now under the leadership of Sekwati. This conflict led to the final destruction of Bokoni, the final scattering of the people of Bokoni and the end of stonewalled settlements in the region.

The walls are built with undressed locally occurring stone. Generally, the two outer layers are constructed with larger rocks, and the inner layer comprises an infill of small rocks, except where slate is used. Here the flat slabs are placed on top of one another in a single line without infill. Walls on average are 1.2 meters high, but some of the best preserved walls are over 2 meters high, although as often only the foundation stones are left.

Who built Bokoni?

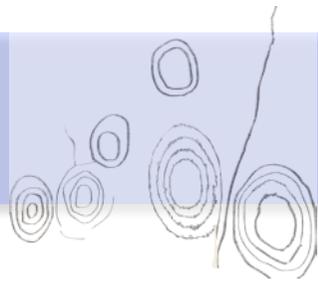
Bokoni was built by black Africans who by the 19th century spoke seKoni which was similar to Sepedi. There is also no evidence to support theories of migration and diffusion – especially the most outlandish and popular versions which posit ancient visitors from India and/ or outer space! These are based on the assumption that it would have been impossible for African societies to develop these structures without outside influence.

How we know



When the distribution of the terraced settlements is compared with the Koni traditions of early settlement on the Mpumalanga escarpment, the two coincide so closely that they confirm the Koni as the builders.

BOKONI HISTORY IN A NUTSHELL



PHASE 1

In approximately 1500 the escarpment was lightly populated by small chiefdoms. Those in open grassland adopted stone as a building material. One hypothesis is that such a community may have settled on a particularly fertile patch of the landscape which included slopes that, despite the rich soil, were rocky and too steep to cultivate normally without serious erosion. By clearing the stones and placing them to check erosion, the advantage of terracing became apparent.



While this settlement model is speculative we are on firmer ground in terms of chronology. We do know that communities have occupied Bokoni since at least the 17th century, because the earliest collected Pedi tradition recalls that in approximately 1650 they encountered Koni groups when they crossed the Crocodile River.

The stonewalled and terraced settlements in the Komati valley that mark the southernmost boundary of Bokoni probably date to the earliest phase of Bokoni. It appears that this area was abandoned in the 1700s, when the Komati valley and other lands to the south and south-east came under mounting pressure.

The reasons for heightened conflict are far from clear at present, but the mounting pressure from the south may have been related to growing competition over the booming ivory trade, along with slave raiding and trading connected to Delagoa Bay, Inhambane and other East Coast commercial centres.



PHASE 2



CW Prinsloo suggested in his 1936 University of Pretoria Master's thesis that the oral traditions he recorded indicated that Moxomatsi near Belfast was the first occupation in Bokoni, but this settlement suffered so many attacks by the 'Mapono' ('Nguni' groups) that the main settlement was relocated to Mohlo-Pela, east of Machadadorp. Simultaneously, smaller chiefs started to develop new villages. Large stonewalled and terraced sites mark the areas Prinsloo associated with Moxomatsi and Mohlo-Pela.

Irrespective of size, the homestead clusters in open valleys have open or terraced garden space within the villages or towns. The settlements in the Dorps River Valley, around Lydenburg, might also date to this period, and could help to illustrate the scale of the Bokoni population. Marker & Evers estimated between 19 000 and 57 000 people would have lived in the Dorps River valley if all the sites in the area were occupied contemporaneously.

The phase 1 and 2 sites were located in open areas that were well suited for agriculture and pastoralism. The spatial configuration would not be easily defensible, and which would have been easy prey for aggressors from further south and east.