HUMAN REMAINS FROM RE-USED HUT CIRCLES AT SYLVIA HILL, S.W.AFRICA/NAMIBIA

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Abstract

This brief report describes the accidental find of three human skeletons associated with a coastal hut complex at Sylvia Hill (during the course of a ground survey project carried out in 1981. Two individuals were Khoisan males, dated to 510± 45BP (Pta-3294) and 1070± 60BP (Pta-3295) and the third was a neonate. All were buried in collapsed rock shelters with no associated grave goods, and were examined by Professor Hertha de Villiers (University of the Witwatersrand) whose comments are incorporated herein.

1. Introduction

Hut circle complexes have been reported from several locations in south-west Africa (Carr et al. 1978; Rudner 1957; Viereck 1968) including some from the southern Namib at Cape Cross (Wendt 1972) and at Grillenberg near Conception Bay (24°6'S, 14°34'E), (Vogel and Visser 1981). The writer has mapped a further series at Rooikamer (23°43'S, 15°26'E) on the river Kuiseb (Shackley, forthcoming) and numerous isolated examples occur within the central Namib desert. The function of these circles seems likely to be complex, sometimes long-term occupation sites (Carr et al 1978), or occasionally mere hunting blinds, but they are usually archaeologically sterile and located primarily in response to seasonal food requirements. The extensive circle complex at Sylvia Hill is especially interesting because of its location on a complex mass of marble outcrops interdigitated with coastal dune sands sloping abruptly to the sea via a steep cliff (Fig.1) and also because a buried spring of fresh water occurs within walking distance. The location of the circles appeared superficially to be related to prevailing winds, and it was decided to map a substantial part of the area to test this hypothesis,

measuring and describing the circles and sampling the occasional surface shell midden deposits associated with them. The full results of this survey have yet to be published, but radio carbon dates of 610± 50BP (Pta-3253) and 290± 45BP (Pta-3252) were obtained from circles Nos. 20 and 29, together with extensive molluscan remains and surface scatters of pottery. Work on an isolated rock outcrop produced 58 shelters in various constructional styles (Fig.2) and degrees of collapse; the presence of some small stone mounds was noted. Similar conical piles of stones 0.3-0.8m high had been observed from the Zerissene Mountain circle complex (Carr et al 1978) and interpreted as marker cairns. It was therefore thought worthwhile to remove these cairns, after planning the circles, in the hope of obtaining dateable organic material which would illustrate the temporal range of the settlement, but all three proved to conceal burials; 2 adult males and one neonate, which had been compressed into spaces in the rock floor of the circles beneath the cairns and weighed down with stones before being covered by additional material from the collapse of the circle.

2. Grave Complex 1

An apparently collapsed hut circle complex covering an area of $3m^2$ near the apex of the rock outcrop (Fig.2) contained a stone 'cairn' some 0.70m high constructed from the remains of two collapsed shelters. It was not possible to distinguish by stratigraphic means which shelter was the earlier, but the two graves revealed by the removal of the cairn were spacially distinct, although filled with blown sand and rock packing. Grave 1 (Fig. 3c) contained the remains of an immature male aged 17-23 and was accompanied by a much smaller grave (Fig. 3b) with the fragmentary remains of a neonate. A radiocarbon date of 510± 45BP (Pta-3294) was obtained for Grave 1 but it was not possible to date the neonate.

3. Grave 2

During cleaning of another hut circle (No.297) situated on a small rock outcrop some 75m east of the main 'island' (Fig.1) a second grave was revealed, also concealed by a stone pile filling the circle (Fig. 3a). The bones represented the contracted burial of a much larger adult Khoisan male, aged 25-35, who was

chronologically much older (1070± 60BP. Pta-3295). There were no associated grave goods. All three skeletons were cleaned, drawn, planned, photographed, removed and packed in sandboxes for transport to Johannesburg, but it was felt that since the object of the expedition was the ground planning of shelters no further clearance should be undertaken since the re-use of circles for burials was clearly commonplace in this area, although not noted before.

4. Skeleton G1

G1 was the contracted burial of an immature male individual of Khoisan type which had been compressed into a depression in the rock floor of the shelter some 45x30cm in size. The cranium and mandible were well preserved and complete with the exception of some post-depositional erosion, and G1 had his complete permanent dentition with the exception of the postmortem loss of I^1 (left) and M_3(right). Axial postcranial remains included vertebrae (7 cervical, 10 thoracic, 3 lumbar), the sacrum, 22 ribs, manubrium, and sternum. The appendicular skeleton was represented by 2 clavicles, the right scapula together with fragments of the left, a complete set of long bones with isolated epiphyses, right ischium, complete carpals and metacarpals, 24 phalanges, 1 calcaneus, 2 talus, 7 other tarsal bones, 10 (complete) metatarsal, 14 phalanges and 1 patella. Features of the skull and ilium suggested that the remains were male, and the platymeric index ($100FeD_1/FeD_2$=84.2%) indicated flattening of the femoral shaft which was not evident in the tibial shaft ($100TiD_2/TiD_1$=87%). Flattening of the shafts has, in the past, been specifically assoviated with San (Bushman) populations and Lisowski (1968) suggested that it resulted from nutritional deficiencies which affected the structure of the bones and so influenced the osseous resistance to the stresses of locomotion. The cranium was small with slight facial projection (100 GL/LB= 98.9%), a relatively broad palate (100 x $G2'/G1'$ = 88%) and a low squat mandibular ramus (rameal index 100 rb'/rl = 77.5%) indicating a Khoisan (Bushman or Hottentot) individual. This identification was supported by the small mastoid process, shallow digastric fossa, delicate tympanic plate and contour of the dental arcade.

5. Neonate (Skeleton G3)

The remains were those of a newly-born infant, very fragile to lift and occupying a grave only 25 cm long in close proximity to the grave of G1 and less than 7 cm deep. The cranial remains, represented only by the right frontal and fragments of the parietal and occipital bones, body and left greater wing of the sphenois and right and left zygomatic bones, were too fragmentary to permit any comment on population affinities. Half the mandible was also present together with the following pieces of the postcranial skeleton. Axial - 20 complete vertebrae, 42 lateral pieces. Complete set of 24 ribs, manubrium and 3 sterbebrae. Appendicular - 2 clavicle, left scapula, 2 humerus, the proximal ends of the 2 ulna, femurs, left tibia, 2 fibula, 2 ilium and only 8 metacarpal/tarsal bones which, with 8 phalanges, represented the entire remains of the hands and feet. Loss of bones was apparently caused by *in situ* weathering in the damp sandy fill of the grave.

6. Skeleton G2

The large fragmented skeleton of G.2 (Fig. 3a) had also been buried in a contracted position and was much damaged by erosion and crushing from the weight of rocks. The cranial vault showed premature closure of the sagittal suture, the mandible was nearly complete, and the complete permanent dentition also present with all teeth except the third molars showing wear with dentine exposure. The postcranial skeleton was represented as follows: axial - 6 cervical vertebrae, 7 thoracic, fragments of 6 others, 3 lumbar vertebrae plus 2 other fragments, fragments of the sacrum, 17 ribs, manubrium and 2 sternebrae. Appendicular - 2 clavicles, 2 fragmented scapulae, humerus, radius, ulna, femur, tibia, all the long bones being fractured, together with fragmentary handbones (9 carpals, 7 metacarpals) and footbones (2 calcaneus, 2 talus, 8 other tarsal, 6 metatarsal, 26 phalanges). The vertebral bodies showed bony lipping, there was evidence of a healed fracture on the 2nd metacarpal, and the remains suggested a fully

adult individual aged 23-35 at time of death. No nutritional deficiencies were apparent and features of the cranium, mandible, humerus, femur and ilium suggested that G2 was a male with an estimated living stature of 158 cm. The cranial vault was small (L 181cm) and narrow, and the cranial base missing, giving an incomplete facial skeleton. However, the face appeared to be non-projecting with a low mandible and relatively broad ramus (rameal index 100 rb'/rl 69.1%) indicating a Khoisan skull.

Penrose's (1954) distance statistic utilising 10 measurements of the cranial vault and face was applied to the data for G1 and for 5 comparative series (San Bushman, Natal Nguni, Cape Nguni, Sotho and Shangana-Tonga southern African Negro tribal groups), (de Villiers 1968), indicating that G1 did indeed have closer affinities with the Khoisan (San) group than with the Negro groups although in size the cranium approximated more closely to the Sotho group, being the smallest of the southern African negro crania. Despite the relatively large size of the G1 cranium by San standards it was still felt that G1 should be assigned to a Khoisan population.

7. Discussion

The wide disparity in date (nearly 500 years) between these two major burials suggests that the Sylvia Hill hut circle complex was in use by people of Khoisan type for a long period of time; a range of nearly 800 years being indicated using dates obtained on charcoal samples from circles 20 and 29. It seems likely that the circle complex was located in response to the availability of fresh water and ample supplies of molluscan food, together with shelter from the prevailing onshore winds. A pattern of seasonal exploitation may be suggested, with the re-use of circles on an opportunistic basis for burial if the need arose. The lack of grave goods and the contracted posture are common features of Khoisan burials, but in this case the

contracted position is also related to the necessity for compressing the bodies into the relatively small available spaces in the rock floors. It seems likely that the bodies were then covered with stones, in order to deter scavengers such as the brown hyena, and that the graves fulled naturally with blown sand. Although no other archaeological material was associated with these burials, surface artefact scatters including pottery are of a type widely recognised in south-west Africa and dated to 490±50 (Pta-2295) at Hottentot Bay (26°09'S, 14°58'E), (Kolb, 1719) reported a comparable intact adult skeleton buried in sand in a crouched position which was dated to 710±50 (Pta-1863) from Conception Bay (Fig.1), 24°01'S, 14°34'E, where fresh water is also available at c 3m depth, and where the site also seems to have been visited over many centuries during this millennium in connection with the exploitation of marine food resources.

Acknowledgments

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FIG (1)

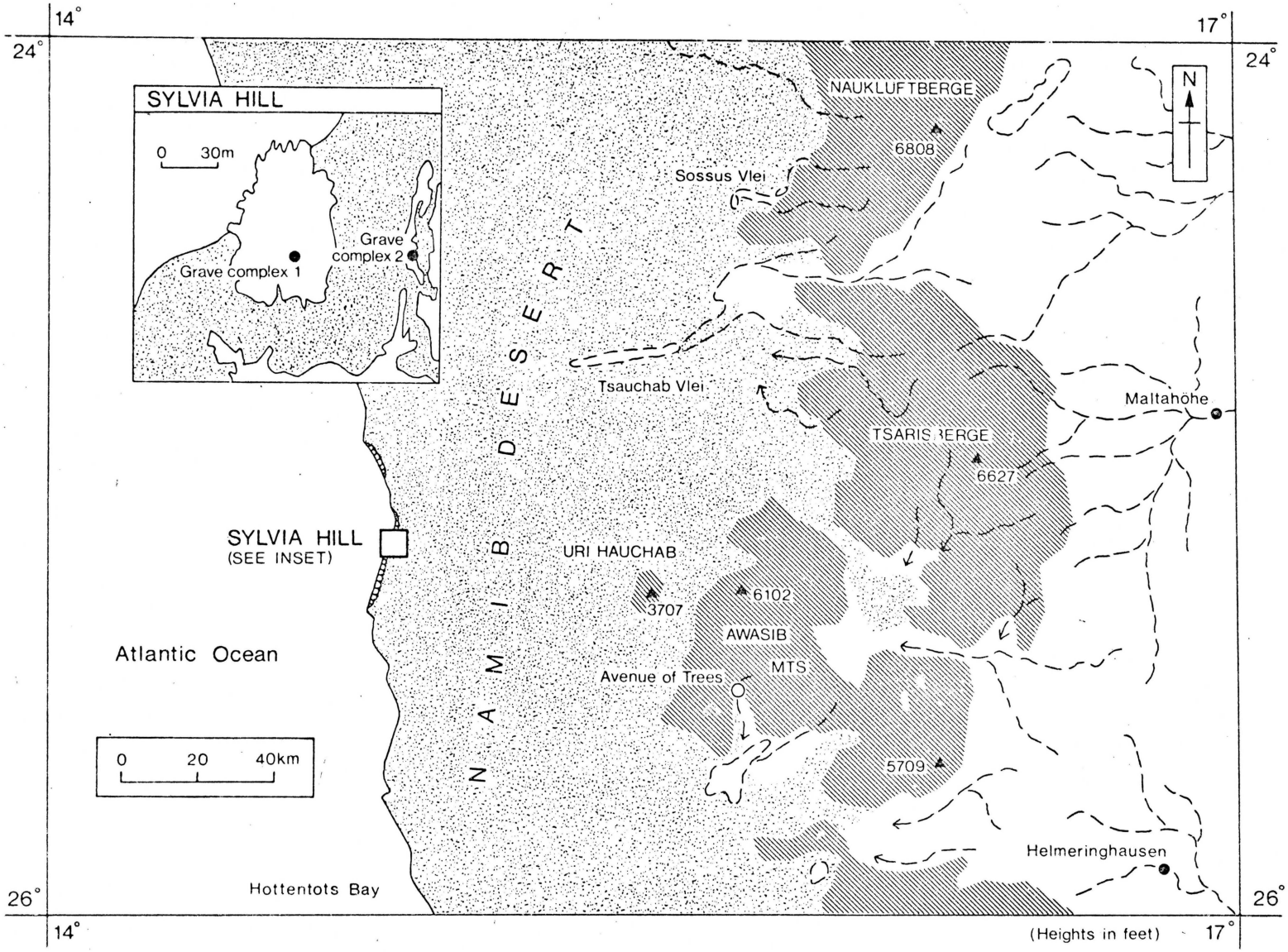
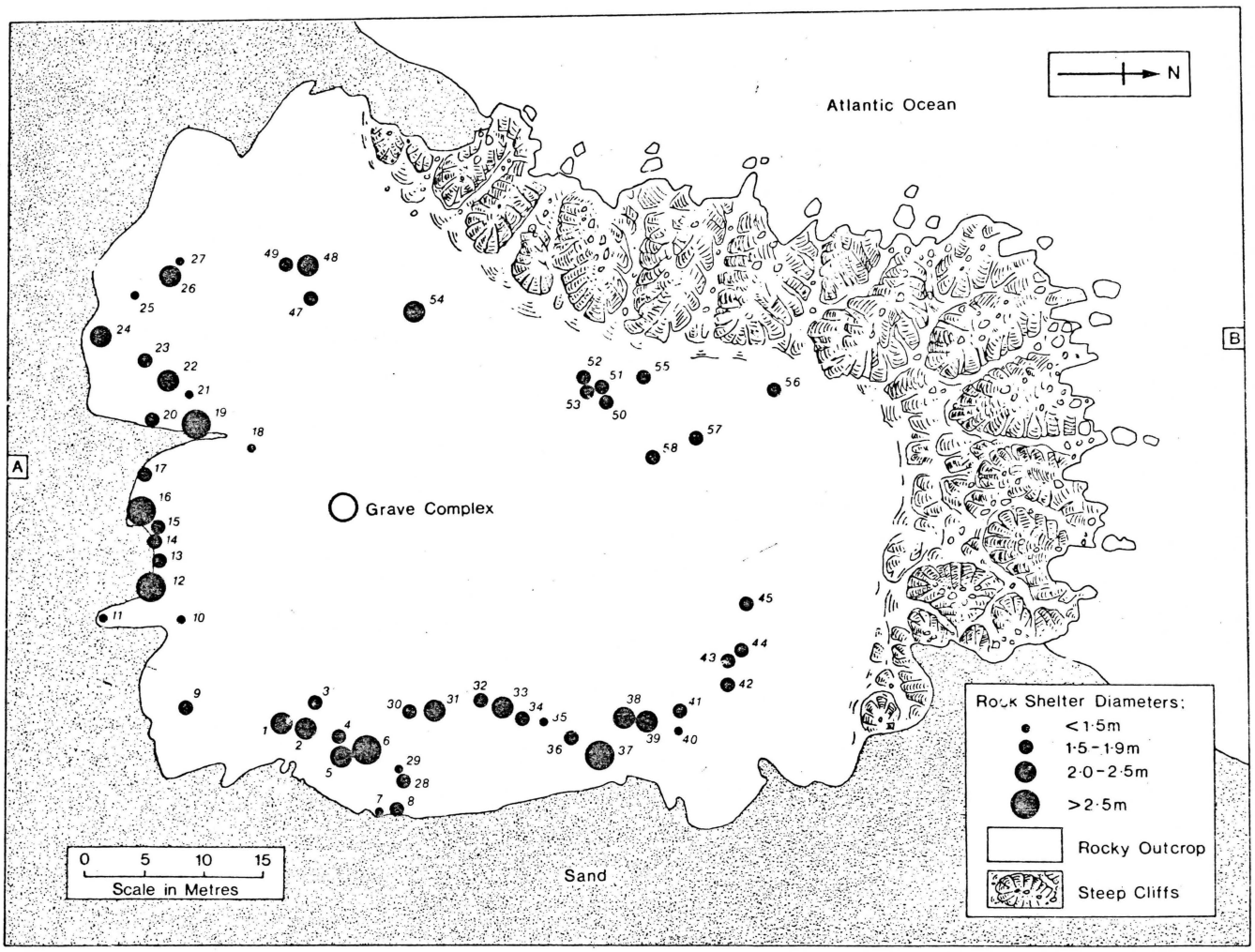

14°
17°
24°
24°
SYLVIA HILL
0 30m
Grave complex 1
Grave complex 2
NAUKLUFTBERGE
6808
Sossus Vlei
N
NAMIB DESERT
Tsauchab Vlei
Maltahöhe
TSARIS BERGE
6627
SYLVIA HILL
(SEE INSET)
URI HAUCHAB
3707
6102
AWASIB
MTS
Avenue of Trees
Atlantic Ocean
0 20 40km
5709
Helmeringhausen
Hottentots Bay
26°
26°
14°
(Heights in feet)
17°

FIG (2)


N
Atlantic Ocean
Grave Complex
A
B
Sand
0 5 10 15
Scale in Metres
Rock Shelter Diameters:
<1·5m
1·5-1·9m
2·0-2·5m
>2·5m
Rocky Outcrop
Steep Cliffs

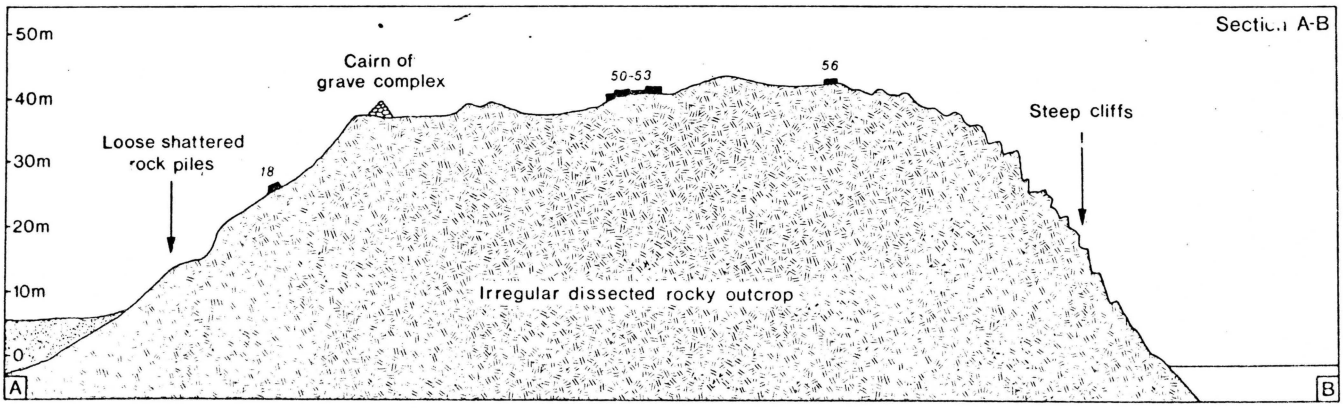

Section A-B
50m
40m
30m
20m
10m
0
Cairn of grave complex
50-53
56
Steep cliffs
Loose shattered rock piles
18
Irregular dissected rocky outcrop
A
B

FIG 3