

# Introduction

## Tswana Towns in Context



The innumerable stone ruins distributed across much of southern Africa between the Gariep and Zambezi rivers are some of the most vivid and remarkable elements of the subcontinent's abundant archaeological landscape. Appearing from around AD 1600, and showing considerable variability in size and form, these Late Iron Age settlements were occupied by various Bantu-speaking agropastoral communities who cultivated crops and venerated cattle as the source of both economic and political wealth (Mason 1968, 1986; Maggs 1976a; Hammond-Tooke 1993; Huffman 2007).

But even against this rich archaeological backdrop, the immense Tswana towns of South Africa stand out as unique. Developing in the mid-1700s and reaching their ultimate expressions by the early 19th century, these extensive stone walled sites—typically associated with late Moloko ceramics—are concentrated in the Pilanesberg/Magaliesberg region to the north of the Highveld (Figs. 4 and 5).

Tswana towns were the capitals of aggregated Tswana-speaking communities—entire chiefdoms living together in a single town under the authority of their resident ruler (Boeyens 2000, 2003; Hall 1995a, 2007). With populations sometimes over 10,000 strong, their considerable size inspired the term 'mega-sites' in earlier archaeological literature (Mason 1986). Their density and scale bear testimony to significant changes that were underway in the Tswana world in the decades prior to their demise.

Most were eventually devastated during the catastrophic *Difaqane* wars that spread to the Pilanesberg/Magaliesberg region in the late 1820s, when the establishment of the Ndebele state in this area under Mzilikazi left many Tswana towns abandoned or destroyed.



Figure 4  
Map of southern Africa,  
showing the location of the  
Pilanesberg/Magaliesberg  
region (see Figure 5).

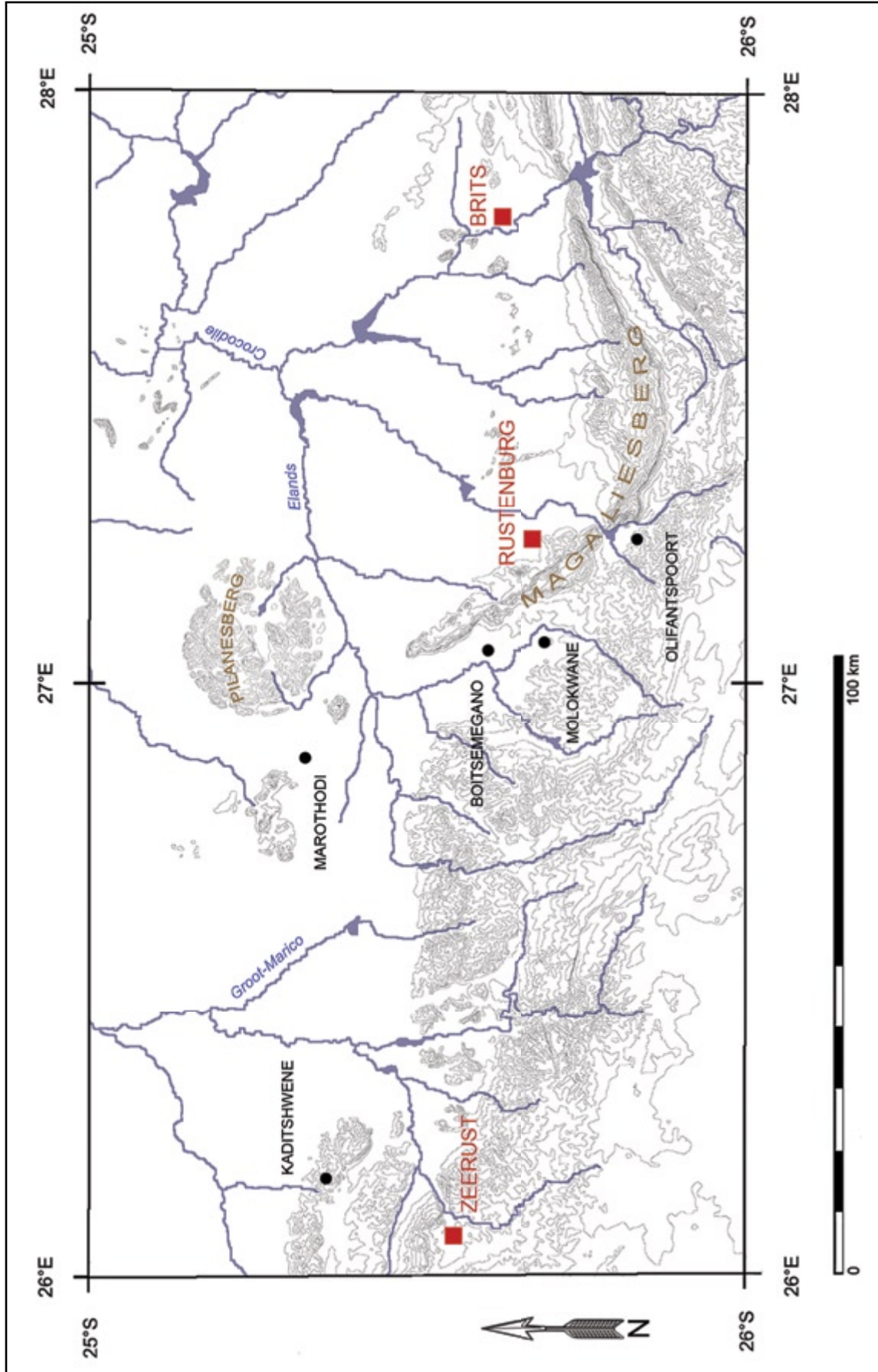


Figure 5  
Map of the Piliamesberg/Magaliiesberg region showing the main stone walled Tswana capitals of the early 19th century (black) and present day towns (red). Topography over 1200 metres and major rivers are also shown.

Archaeological research on Tswana towns has, since the 1980s, predominantly revolved around the application of an ethnographically derived normative model, known as the 'Central Cattle Pattern', for the interpretation of settlement space and organisation (Kuper 1982; Huffman 1986a, 2001; Pistorius 1991).

Although such models are useful and enlightening to archaeologists who study the organisation of 'prehistoric' or 'proto-historic' settlements, they operate on a very general scale, glossing over the detail, variability, and most importantly the historical processes that are important aspects of understanding a society.

Consequently, an exclusive focus on normative models exposes us to the risk of viewing the Tswana preference for town living as an inherent cultural norm, detached from the diachronic processes that led to the relatively sudden development of Tswana towns in the archaeological record from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To continue with this approach would contribute nothing new, unless we change the scale of analysis and insert the insights yielded by normative models into historical contexts.

Our premise is the recognition that the study of this period falls within the realm of historical archaeology, and that Tswana capitals were home to historical identities (Reid & Lane 2004; Behrens & Swanepoel 2008). The organisation of a town was a culturally-driven response to a set of specific historical circumstances, and each should be examined as a unique expression of the people who built and occupied it. To understand Tswana towns more completely, therefore, we need to develop interdisciplinary research frameworks that combine ethnography, archaeology, and the historical resolution afforded by the careful use of associated oral traditions (Vansina 1961, 1971; Deetz 1988; Orser 1996).

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century site of Marothodi, which means 'raindrops' in Setswana, is situated near the Pilanesberg in today's North West Province in South Africa (Figs. 5 and 6). Marothodi was the capital of a Tlokwa chiefdom, and is an historically-defined site through which we can explore the value of an interdisciplinary approach to Sotho-Tswana archaeology. Previous archaeological work at other Tlokwa centres has indicated that this lineage stems from early Nguni origins, which would distinguish them from the western Sotho-Tswana occupants of neighbouring aggregated capitals (Mason 1986, Coetzee 2005, Huffman 2007).

While the Tlokwa must, therefore, have become 'Tswana-ised' at a relatively recent point in their history, the settlement style and structure we see at Marothodi certainly seems to reflect a Tswana worldview by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for this reason Sotho-Tswana ethnography will be predominantly relevant to our understanding of the capital. This is particularly pertinent to our discussion of the organisation and cultural structure of specialised metal production here. The evidence for a non-Tswana origin of the Tlokwa nevertheless offers an indication from the outset that Marothodi was not a 'typical' Tswana town, and that our archaeological analysis of the capital might reveal important elements of variability in the organisation of the settlement.

Our journey into the Tswana world begins with the journals of the first Europeans who made contact with Tswana communities in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These primary sources emphasise the historical nature of Tswana towns and contribute to our understanding of

contemporary regional dynamics. They also demonstrate the time depth of the Tswana 'ethnographic present'. We follow this in Chapter Two with a review of the research background to the archaeology of Iron Age stone walled sites in South Africa. With increasing focus on the Tswana towns of the Pilanesberg/Magaliesberg region we examine the development of systematic archaeological research, and discuss the main theoretical frameworks that define the disciplinary milieu of the current work.

In Chapters Three, Four and Five we are introduced to the Marothodi region and to the site itself, as we explore the historical, biophysical and archaeological context of the town. As we will see, the oral traditions of the occupying Tlokwa community reveal that Marothodi was one of several sequential settlements established by this chiefdom in the Pilanesberg/Magaliesberg area, and that this sequence straddles a period of significant political shifts in the Tswana world. When considered against the deeper Nguni roots of the Tlokwa, we start to develop a unique historical backdrop against which the archaeology of Marothodi can be explored in more detail.

As no prior archaeological research had been undertaken at Marothodi, the gathering of new data was a key objective. In Chapters Six to Nine we take a closer look at some of the Marothodi homesteads, and present reports on the archaeological survey and excavations conducted there. While fieldwork was predominantly orientated around metal production sites within the settlement, spatial and material evidence was recorded across a range of domestic, ceremonial and industrial contexts.

From the gathered archaeological data, Chapter Ten presents a technological and ethnographic discussion of the practice and organisation of iron and copper production at Marothodi. Here, we discover that the organisation of production was guided by underlying Tswana cultural codes and values that were resiliently upheld, despite having to be adapted to the new challenges of living in a high-density town environment.

In Chapter Eleven we conclude with a review of our insights into the archaeological expression of identity at Marothodi, and reconsider some of the regional dynamics in which Marothodi participated. We also highlight the greater depth of interpretation obtained by viewing this Tswana capital against its historical, political and biophysical backdrop, within an interdisciplinary research framework. Finally, directions for future research are suggested, and we acknowledge the impressive achievement of this resourceful African community.

Figure 6  
Oblique aerial photograph  
of the 'Secondary' *Kgosing*,  
one of the royal residences at  
Marothodi.

