

Lesotho Highlands Water Project archaeological study discovers rare artefacts in the Polihali Dam basin

The Cultural Heritage Management programme – one of the social and environmental programmes of Phase II of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), celebrated a milestone on 17 November 2021 when an intact pot dating back to the 19th century was found.

A rare discovery, the pot (*moritšoana*) was found in an upside-down position during the excavation of a site locally known as Langalibalele's (*sunny day*) Shelter, at Ha Rapolatsane along the Sehonghong River in the Mokhotlong district. At three metres, it is the deepest Later Stone Age shelter site excavated in Lesotho to date.

This is the first whole pot discovered in the mitigation of 27 archaeological sites to date. Jordan Scholfield, the LHDA Young Professional, placed with the cultural heritage management programme implemented by PGS Heritage, says preliminary indications are that the rare discovery dates back to the late 1800s.

“Throughout our site excavations in the study area, we have found pieces of pottery associated with hearths in the deposits. We did not expect to find an intact pot though due to the trampling of the shelters by both humans and livestock over the years. We are excited to have made this discovery. Our preliminary assessment suggests that the pot is of Basotho origin. However, it is not yet evident whether the hunter-gatherers obtained it from Basotho groups living in the lowlands or whether it was brought in by Basotho herders in the latter half of the 19th century.

Historically, Basotho groups arrived and settled in the Mokhotlong district in growing numbers between 1873 and 1880 when hunter-gatherer groups were still present in the area. Pending radio-carbon



dating of the site will assist us in giving the pot context,” said Jordan.

Another exciting discovery during the excavation of Langalibalele’s Shelter is the unearthing of 240 stone arrowheads. Such a tally has never been recorded from any known Later Stone Age context in the southern African interior.

Prof. Peter Mitchell of Oxford University records 29 such points/discoveries for all archaeological endeavours in the whole of Lesotho since the 1960s. A recent Master’s Degree thesis submitted to Wits University tallied only 60 such points from their known distribution on the Highveld in South Africa. Given this, the site is likely to be key to our understanding of the production, practices and social significance of these small stone arrowheads across their recorded distribution.

Len van Schalkwyk, PGS Heritage’s in-country team leader, confirms that it is becoming apparent from the excavations for the Polihali Dam basin that the Lesotho basaltic highlands were indeed not considered refugee areas by the hunter-gatherers as is conventionally perceived. Instead, they were considered as living space in a landscape the hunter-gatherers considered home.

These arrow points and other artefacts such as stone tools, pottery, metal items and jewellery; wild and domestic animal remains; charcoal, wood, leather and ostrich egg-shell beads; fish remains and bone tools retrieved from the different sites support the assertions that the basaltic highlands were home to hunter-gatherer groups for thousands of years. In historical times, Basotho used these shelters for temporary shelter and in the shepherding and herding of livestock. Langalibalele’s Shelter, though, is proving to be “the jewel in the crown”.

“We are excited about the latest rare discoveries made on the cultural heritage contract. Our aim with the studies is to conserve the cultural heritage finds for future generations. We are proud to confirm that in achieving its mandate, the programme has entailed not only excavation and field recordings of the highest standards, but highly exact post-field cataloguing, preliminary analysis and the curation of the excavated material. Mitigating these sites is providing considerable insights into how hunter-gatherers used the Polihali mountainous areas over a period of possibly 4000 years and insights into the hunter-gatherer/farmer interactions in more recent historical times,” states Gerard Mokone, the LHDA’s Polihali Operations Branch Manager

While heritage conservation initiatives across the world too often focus on tangible aspects of heritage, the LHWP cultural heritage programme has also recorded the intangible aspects of heritage such as cultural landscapes and sites of spiritual, cultural and historical significance, including sacred pools (*likoetsa*), protective stones (*lithaklisa*) initiation lodges (*mephato*) and battlefields.

Besides the Archaeological Baseline Study commissioned by the LHDA in 2013 and the subsequent Cultural Heritage Plan currently being developed and implemented by PGS Heritage, the Polihali area has seen very little archaeological research. Thus, the LHWP contributes significantly to protecting the cultural heritage resources for future generations and provides a basis for exciting future research, both within Lesotho and internationally.