



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Investigating the Chronology of Sites in Arid Zones

Looking at a map of southern Africa one is struck by the disproportionately large area taken up by arid and semi-arid climatic zones relative to temperate and tropical ones. However, the archaeological record of the region is biased, with far fewer sites known from these arid regions. This relates to issues of site visibility and preservation, while problems of chronology have presented a further challenge. Increased interest in dryland archaeological research in southern Africa, over the past decade, is slowly changing this imbalance. Following the commencement of several new survey and excavation projects, datasets are available that cover gaps in our knowledge of chronology: lithic and ceramic typology, biochronology, geochronology. New dating results, mainly from radiocarbon and trapped-charge dating methods, are filling chronological hiatuses, changing our perceptions of these regions that, traditionally, were perceived as marginal.

This session aims to explore the chronology of archaeological sites located in arid and semi-arid regions of southern Africa, both on the local and regional scale.

Papers are welcome that deal with all aspects of chronology, including methodology as well as case studies, relating to: Lithic typology, Ceramic typology, Absolute dating, Biochronology and Geochronology

A uniform forager rock art tradition in Southern Africa? Questioning similarities and differences through time and space.

Similarities between fine-line, brush-painted rock paintings in different areas of southern African have led to the notion of a 'southern African forager rock art tradition'. From the 1920s onwards, archaeologists like Miles Burkitt and others defined different rock art regions based on a set of attributes. They noted that the images in one region shared a range of colours and motifs that differed from other regions. Later studies demonstrated further aspects of diversity through investigations at small and large scales, from particular kinds of painted motifs to whole regions. What began as an iconographic study of motifs developed through attention to chronological relationships. Archaeological evidence shows that figurative painting was practised in Southern Africa from around 27 kya in Namibia. Ethnohistorical evidence records that some of the last fine-line rock paintings were made as late as 1932 CE on the border between South Africa and Lesotho. The relationship between uniformity and diversity in the rock art continues to be studied across Southern Africa in Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, eSwatini, Lesotho, and South Africa. Researchers are investigating continuity and discontinuity through time and across space using different criteria, with discussions focusing on the cultural implications of these trends. Several theoretical and methodological approaches are being used to investigate uniformity/diversity and continuity/discontinuity. These have the potential to provide complementary insights and develop a nuanced understanding of the long-lived forager tradition.

Maritime Cultural Heritage research and sustainability in Africa: Towards transformative engagement

Traditionally, maritime heritage research has received little attention within the southern African region, either due to the lack of resource or specific training programs at university level. However, the sea and waterways, have always been a major theatre playing an important role in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of communities. Over the last decade, there has been an exponential increase on maritime research and sustainable strategies to improve people's life and understand their relationship with the sea and ongoing landscape changes. In this session, we intend to bring together maritime archaeologists and heritage practitioners whose research intersects on the documentation, conservation, and sustainable strategies at community level. In the broader perspective, the session aims to share knowledge to foster a transformative notion of maritime archaeology and management of maritime heritage fostering community well-being. It addresses the archaeological record studied within the maritime perspective, analyzes a research agenda in the African context and investigates how to foster diversity and inclusion (scholarly and public engagement) in the maritime cultural heritage profession.

Archaeology of the Maloti-Drakensberg foothills.

The foothills of the Maloti-Drakensberg are home to a rich range of archaeological sites. Rock shelters in these areas preserve depositional sequences as well as rock paintings. Current Middle and Later Stone Age researchers focus on a range of specialist topics from paleoenvironmental reconstructions to studies of faunal assemblages and material culture such as lithics and rock art. Such studies aim to contribute to a better understanding of local archaeological sequences and how they compare with the archaeology of other regions, particularly sites at higher elevations of the Maloti-Drakensberg region. This session aims to discuss and compare trends and characteristics in the archaeological material of the foothills. It seeks to ask what that material shows about the history of the people who inhabited or moved through the foothills. The objective of the session's discussions is to bring to the fore issues concerning patterns of uniformity and diversity in various kinds of material culture, as well as past mobility and trade networks. The session also aims to introduce new and ongoing research that focuses on the archaeology of the Maloti-Drakensberg's foothills.

Cultural Heritage Management in Lesotho - The Polihali Dam Cultural Heritage Management Project

The Polihali Dam Cultural Heritage Management Plan was completed in August 2023. PGS Heritage and its affiliated specialists will provide feedback on the remarkable discoveries and outcomes of the research and documentation related to the tangible and intangible heritage of the project. This will be the first opportunity to showcase the previously unknown archaeology of the basaltic highlands of Lesotho. The focus will be on the interconnectedness of hunter-gatherers and early agropastoral communities, and how the natural environment shaped the heritage of the area.

Out in the open: Ongoing research at Pleistocene open-air sites in southern Africa.

Southern Africa has the most extensive hominin occupational record after the East African Rift Valley. Sites that preserve evolutionary milestones such as increased complex cognition, the manufacture of stone tools, controlled use of fire, pigment use, and engravings have been studied across southern Africa at sites such as Wonderwerk Cave, Sterkfontein Caves, Blombos Cave, and Pinnacle Point. However, there has been a significant focus on cave sites and rock shelters, as these sites generally have better-preserved sedimentary contexts. Open-air sites often lack these well-preserved sedimentary contexts and are more exposed to environmental and climatic influences, resulting in difficulties for analysis. Nevertheless, research at open-air sites such as Florisbad, Canteen Kopje, Kathu Pan and Makgadikgadi has highlighted the importance of open-air sites for interpreting the evolution of anatomically modern humans. Open-air archaeological sites have great potential to contribute to current discussions and debates surrounding the origin of our species, their cognitive development and morphological evolution, and how factors such as paleoenvironmental changes influenced this. This session aims to encourage discussions between researchers working on open-air sites employing multi-proxy methods from various sub-disciplines within the palaeosciences to help bridge the gap and challenge the biases.

Using the Future to Know the Past: Conversations on Technology in Heritage

Advances in technology present an array of opportunities and challenges for the heritage sector. The ability to capture, store and express the complexities of heritage across massive scale and in fine detail has created new avenues of research and analysis. From remote sensing to computational analytics, from sector wide data recording to drone enabled photogrammetry, heritage recording and interpretation has seen a swathe of research avenues and techniques develop as technology becomes both more diverse, and more accessible. But these developments are not without their challenges. Large datasets, high-cost equipment and specialist knowledge are just a few of the hurdles that face professionals and researchers trying to make the most of technology in the heritage field.

Heritage Resource Management

Heritage Resource Management (HRM) is a vital component of safeguarding heritage resources. Without HRM, this could result in the loss of heritage resources. This session will discuss the key components relating to HRMs, such as the role of local, provincial, and national authorities. This session will also provide an opportunity to discuss new ideas in the sector for becoming proactive within the National Heritage Resource Act.

The evolution of Heritage Resources Management in SADC

HRM in South Africa has been developing since the early 1990s, with more structure provided with the promulgation of the National Heritage Resources Act, Act 25 of 1999 (NHRA), which at the time was heralded as a highly inclusive and transformative piece of legislation. With the 25th anniversary of the enacting of the NHRA in 2024, a comparative analysis of the development of the SA HRM industry in relation to the various SADC countries is proposed. What are the gaps and challenges with regards to education, skills development and transformation within the SADC? How do the various pieces of heritage legislation across the SADC region effect the planning and roll out of HRM based activities in practice.

Awakening dead collections

Take a peek inside a museum storeroom, and you might expect to see a famous archaeological find or artefacts from sites that have been researched for decades. But what lies in the boxes at the back, covered in layers of dust, the boxes no one knows about, the ones no one cares about or those with difficult histories that no one wants to touch. Curating institutions across the world are faced with the challenge of 'dead' collections. These legacy, orphaned or unresearched collections have complex or neglected histories that have consigned them to deep storage or a state of ambiguity. This session explores the challenges that come from a century or more of collecting in the midst of changing priorities and methodologies. It raises questions about how to promote research on inactive collections, how to rehabilitate legacy collections and how to address difficult histories?

A multidisciplinary view on the process of regionalization during Marine Isotope Stage 5 in southern Africa

The Middle Stone Age (MSA) of Marine Isotope Stage (MIS) 5 is associated with the emergence of distinct cultural expressions that start to diverge from one region to another. Traditionally, lithic industries have provided the foundations for a discussion on the onset and development of such regional trajectories across southern Africa during MIS 5. Especially in the last two decades, numerous projects are flourishing across sub-Saharan Africa that favour the establishment of regional chrono-cultural sequences against a refined palaeoenvironmental background. We feel that the time is ripe to discuss the wealth of data that allows us to highlight appearances and expansions of noticeable regional trajectories. We expect that the confrontation of a whole range of proxies (i.e., lithic technology, exploitation of plant and animal remains, pigment use, site occupation) both at the site- and at the region-scale may provide a comprehensive picture of the dynamics at play behind the development of regionally diverse cultural manifestations.

While MIS 5 is central to the discussion because it witnessed a suite of technological and behavioural innovations that may relate to an early stage of regionalization, it is equally relevant to consider previous and succeeding phases to explore this process. In this session, we would like to invite all contributions presenting data on cultural expressions that might be tied to some degree of regional differentiation – from all disciplinary fields of MSA archaeology. We hope to engage discussions not only on the nature of regional variability but also on the nature of the “regions” themselves. For instance, we would like to ask whether geographic, climatic and/or mental boundaries may or may not be identified using the archaeological record and what these presumed boundaries might mean in terms of human connectivity and movement during MIS 5 in particular and the Late Pleistocene in general.

Research trends in southern African Farmer Archaeology

Over the past couple of decades, archaeology has reinvented itself multiple times, integrating new methods and theories, branching across multiple new disciplines and across academic boundaries between the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. By constantly moving, it is a dynamic and exciting field. This session will bring together a depth of knowledge about the topical, contemporary issues in the practice of archaeology (with a specific focus on the archaeology of past farmers) in southern Africa, both theoretical and practical. Given the above background, this session will explore several themes or topics of current interest that are given a broad comparative approach in the “Iron Age,” examining important issues on regional, continental and in some cases, global scales. The session will be of interest to researchers working in various aspects of the regional history, and to other stakeholders in Iron Age research. Participants will benefit not only from the information provided by the speakers, and the many different perspectives on climate science, landscapes and modelling but also by the exchange of ideas between researchers during the panel discussion, and the potential recommendations about how to provide new directions for research.

Hunter-gatherer archaeology [still] matters: a session in honour of Peter Mitchell

Nearly two decades ago, Peter Mitchell argued for the contemporary relevance of hunter-gatherer archaeology. In recognition of Peter's huge influence and support of research across the African continent, and especially here in Lesotho, we take up his call and invite scholars to present on the diversity of hunter-gatherer archaeological records and showcase their relevance for understanding the emergence, expansion, and persistence of our species. Questions of identity and interaction and what it means to be a person, responses to climate change and extinction, and ways of relating respectfully to the non-human world, are just three of the fundamental themes that hunter-gatherer archaeology can speak to over a range of temporal and spatial scales including in the 21st century. We also invite reflection on defining exactly what hunter-gathering is. Are we talking about modes of subsistence, or ways of seeing and being in the world? Whatever standpoint is taken, we suggest that by comparing and contrasting hunter-gatherer records across space and time, archaeology can provide crucial insights relevant to the entirety of humankind.

Zulu Kingdom Archaeology Project

The Zulu Kingdom has a rich historical and archaeological record, but attention has primarily focused on the workings of the elite: politics, military engagements, and the settlements of Zulu kings. Building on this foundation, this session introduces interim results from a new interdisciplinary, collaborative and theoretically grounded research programme that explores settlements and life ways in the 'heartland' of the kingdom- the eMaKhosini. The world within and beyond the abodes of Zulu kings offers new insights into the emergence, development and organisation of the Zulu Kingdom during the 19th century and our understanding of large complex precolonial polities in South Africa.

Thinking as Africans in African Heritage Management.

This session aims to apply a critical lens to archaeology practice and heritage management approaches, to explore how we can bridge the gap between African versus Western (colonial) approaches that frame the disciplines of heritage management and archaeology. We seek contributions that move towards making archaeology and heritage theoretical and management approaches more relevant for African societies. We therefore ask whether it is possible to truly decolonise archaeology/heritage through practices and if so, how do we do it? 'Community-based' is a term often used to denote 'decolonising practice', - what is really happening? We seek contributions that interrogate the legacies of archaeological, ethnographic and anthropological collecting and conservation practices in museums and relevant institutions, with a view to encouraging home-grown emic approaches of preservation/conservation. How can we include African structures (e.g. chiefdoms, villages) with museums and universities to inspire collaborative approaches to preserving, interpreting, and celebrating African heritage? We welcome contributions from archaeologists and heritage practitioners at all levels.