

# The excursions - Symposium on Ancient Mining and Metallurgy in Southern Africa

by BERT WOODHOUSE

Excursions add much to any symposium. They enable the participants to see something of the subject matter, and provide an opportunity for informal discussion and for the creation or renewal of friendships.

In this respect the Ancient Mining Symposium was well provided for. There were two excursions and both were repeated to cope with the large number of participants.

Dr Revil Mason devised and led the one-day excursion. It started on Melville Koppies, site of an Iron Age furnace for the smelting of iron, which is dated more or less contemporaneously with the Norman Conquest of England. The furnace enabled its operators to smelt ore from local outcrops of ironstone.

From Melville Koppies two buses conveyed the party to Broeder-

stroom and the partially excavated remains of an early Iron Age village. Here Dr Mason was able to break the news that carbon from the site had just been dated at approximately 460 to 490 A.D., making it contemporary with the collapse of Imperial Rome and one of the earliest villages south of the Sahara.

Apart from hut circles and floors, the site contained considerable evidence of iron smelting in the shape of slag and fragments of tuyères. Dr Mason drew attention to finds of pottery typologically similar to finds in the Durban and East London areas. Of particular interest was a 'pot burial' containing remains from two individuals, including some teeth, which have proved to be outside the range of dimensions characteristic of South African Bantu-speaking peoples and more akin to the negroes of the Congo.

From Broederstroam the party went to a mine in the Olifantsnek area recently discovered and partially excavated by Mr Robbie Steel, technician in the Department of Archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand. As yet no date is available, but charcoal has been recovered from the trench that has been dug through the spoil heap. The ore mined was copper, similar in composition to that at Uitkomst, which was reported by Professor Mason in *Prehistory of the Transvaal*.

Mr Steel, who accompanied the party, drew attention to the proximity of a second mine and the Iron Age village on the other side of the modern road to Rustenburg. This village consisted of 120 huts and has been reliably dated at about 1500 A.D.

The second excursion, which occupied a full weekend, was to see ancient workings at Thabazimbi and Rooiberg. Unfortunately, neither site has yet received systematic archaeological attention so that virtually nothing is known of the dates or associated cultures of the people who were responsible for the workings.

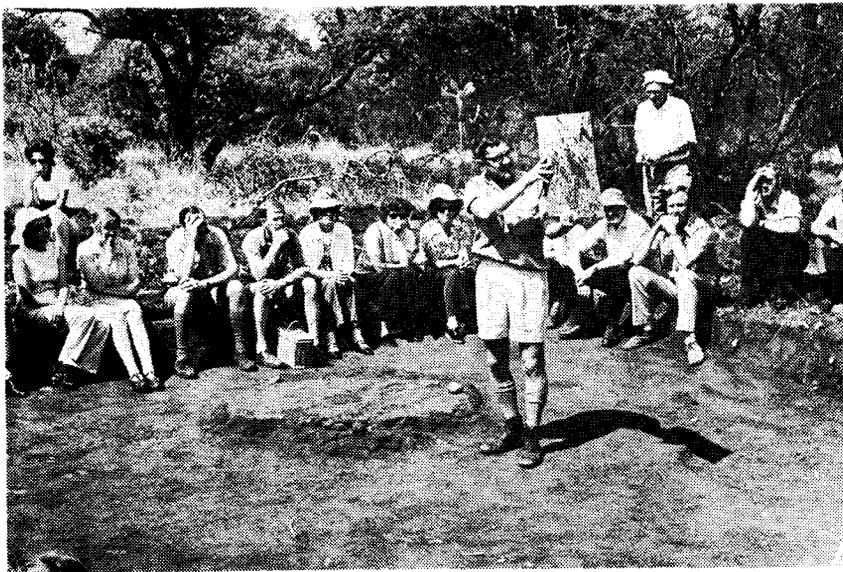


Plate I—Professor Revil Mason drawing attention to important features at the Broederstroam village site. (Alongside Professor Mason are the remains of an ancient hut floor.)

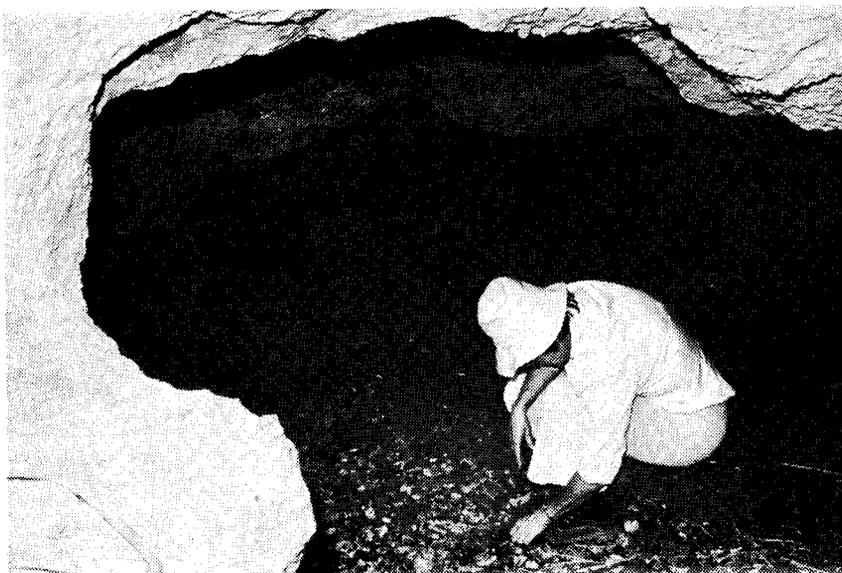
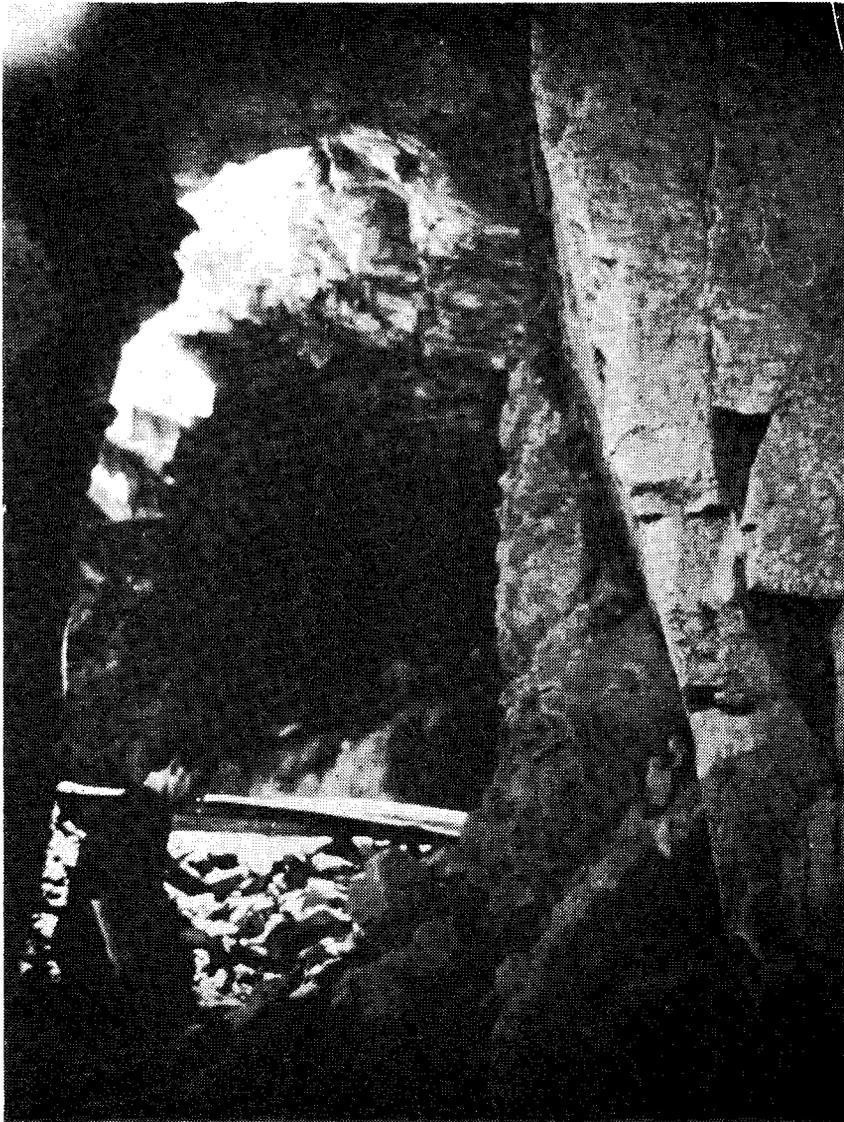


Plate II—In the ancient iron workings, Thabazimbi.



**Plate III—In the ancient tin workings, Rooiberg.**

At both places the evidence of mining activity is clear, and at Rooiberg, in particular, a number of surface finds of tin ingots, slag, etc. have been made.

The lack of scientific evidence certainly did not detract from the

interest and enjoyment that were derived by those who participated. The management of the modern successors of the 'ancients'—whoever they were—went out of their way to ensure that everyone had the opportunity of seeing all the evi-

dence, and then provided the right environment and refreshments for the encouragement of learned discussion. It is to be hoped that there will eventually be a 'pay-off' in an archaeological research project covering both these intriguing areas.