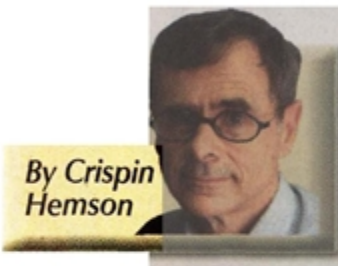
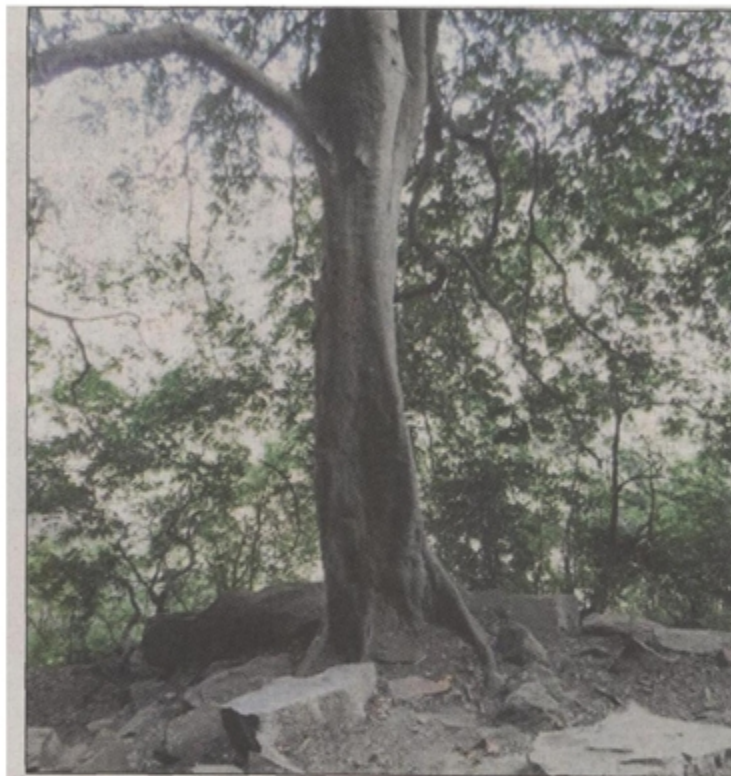


# The long past on which we are built

*Preserving the precious Sibudu Cave on the North Coast, that tells us so much about life thousands of years ago, is of paramount importance*



By Crispin Hemson



A Natal Elm growing at the edge of the site.



Excavations at Sibudu Cave on the North Coast have yielded a wealth of artefacts from the past.

**Y**OUNG men stand in the river, digging sand and loading it into drums, then carry it laboriously to empty them into a pile, soon to be loaded on to a snorting tractor that will pull it up the sharp incline. Behind us are the rounded hills – some grassland, a bit of cultivation, some bush, homesteads dotted around – the unremarkable landscape along the North Coast.

We wade across the river and then clamber up rocks until we suddenly find ourselves under a huge overhang of rocks.

We are at one of the world's most remarkable places – Sibudu Cave. Here are excavations of a different kind. The archaeology here reveals an amazing history of human habitation. The lowest level currently being worked on takes us back 80 000 years.

Within a space of a few metres is the neatly squared excavation, revealing a series of layers – some brown, some white, others chestnut or beige – each a record of what was deposited over one period of time. Each layer is meticulously labelled, and each object taken from the sand at that layer is plotted minutely in terms of its position.

We speak of archaeological diggings, and some sections have been cut out and impregnated with resin for microscopic analysis. Much of the rest is rather brushing.

Such is the density of the human record – arrowheads, chipped stones, bits of animal bone, the remains of plants

brought in – that the lightest touch of a brush is needed to remove the sand.

Not many South Africans know about Sibudu. Yet its significance has led to publications in journals and magazines like *Science* and the *Economist*.

It has yielded a wealth of artefacts and provided information like few sites in the world. Here were found bone points, dating back 62 000-65 000 years ago, and possibly the world's oldest bone arrowhead. Around 77 000 years ago, people were collecting sedge and the leaves of the wild river quince (*Cryptocarya woodii* or *isilandangulube*), the leaves of which are aromatic and repel insects. These are the earliest archaeological records of human bedding.

A compound glue made of plant gum and ochre was used to link sharp-edged stones to shafts around 71 000 years ago, an indication of some sophistication in thinking and planning. Attempts to replicate the production of this glue have revealed how difficult it is to manipulate the materials so as to get them sufficiently strong.

Even in a group like ours, as you stand on the sloping surface, you become aware of the protection from sun, rain, heat and cold, why this shelter

would have been sought by countless generations.

Along its edge, where plants can get access to rain, grows a Natal Elm, *Celtis mildbraedii*, so well known to me from Durban's Pigeon Valley, yet perhaps far from the next specimen. It perches precariously on the edge, at the point where there is just enough rain to sustain plant life.

You become aware of how technical knowledge – the medicinal qualities of plants – has a lineage so ancient, and how our cultures, our knowledge have been so interwoven with the natural landscape.

A small clay pot up against the rocks was recently placed as a tribute to the ancestors of a local person.

The site is easily accessed, and close to modern settlements, but the sense of connection between local people and the sacred cave has kept it safe.

The multiple layers, until now hidden from sight, spoke to me of the ways our history has been built up, the slow accumulation of events, connections made and lost, relationships built up, histories that affect us that we seldom question – if we know them at all. We have so little knowledge of

what happened in the centuries before Shaka, except what has been passed down through oral histories, captured in language and technical knowledge, such as the knowledge of plants.

Few countries could ever hope to have a resource like this. If we neglect this, we do so foolishly. There are pressures on the site – the sand winning is illegal, housing is spreading

ever closer, bringing in people without a sense of the local history. The area needs protection; one indication is the spreading Barbados gooseberry that is choking local vegetation.

I recently visited the farm of a cousin in England, and saw Roman coins he had found there.

In comparison, we are so negligent of the far longer his-

tory around us. Sibudu represents the striking historic resources of our region. It is a fascinating heritage that calls for better protection.

● Crispin Hemson is the director of the International Centre of Nonviolence, based at the Durban University of Technology.



The site is under pressure from outside sources.