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## HUMAN BURIALS IN HUT CIRCLES AT SYLVIA HILL, S.W. AFRICA / NAMIBIA

**Myra Shackley,**  
*Department of Archaeology,  
University of Leicester,  
Leicester, LE1 7RH,  
England.*

*(with 3 figures)*  
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### ABSTRACT

Three human skeletons found in association with a coastal hut complex at Sylvia Hill (26°34'S, 14°36'E), are described. The skeletons represent chance discoveries made during a ground survey project carried out in 1981. Two of the burials were of Khoisan males, dated 510 ± 45 BP (Pta-3294) and 1070 ± 60 BP (Pta - 3295) respectively, and the third burial was of a neonate. All three individuals had been buried under cairns in collapsed hut circles with no associated grave goods. Descriptions and analyses by Professor Hertha de Villiers (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) are also included.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hut circle complexes have been reported from several locations in Namibia (Carr *et al.* 1978; Rudner 1957; Viereck 1968) including some from the southern Namib at Cape Cross (Wendt 1972) and at Grillenberg (29°6'S, 14°34'E) near Conception Bay (24°6'S, 14°34'E), (Vogel and Visser 1981). The author has mapped a further series at Rooikamer (23°43'S, 15°26'E) on the Kuiseb river (Shackley, in prep.), and further numerous isolated examples occur within the central Namib desert. The function of these circles seems likely to be complex, either long-term occupation sites (Carr *et al.* 1978) or occasionally mere hunting blinds, but they are usually archaeologically sterile and located primarily in response to available food resources.

The extensive circle complex at Sylvania Hill is especially interesting, firstly because of its location on a complex mass of marble outcrops interdigitated with coastal dune sands sloping abruptly to the sea via a steep cliff (Fig. 1), and secondly because of a buried spring of fresh water within walking distance. The location of the circles appeared superficially to be related to prevailing winds, and it was decided to map a substantial part of the area to test this hypothesis. Individual circles were measured and described, and associated shell midden deposits sampled. The full results of this survey have yet to be published, but radiocarbon dates of  $610 \pm 50$ BP (Pta-3253) and  $290 \pm 45$ BP (Pta-3252) were obtained from circles Nos. 20 and 29 (Fig. 2), together with extensive molluscan remains and surface scatters of pottery. Work on an isolated rock outcrop produced

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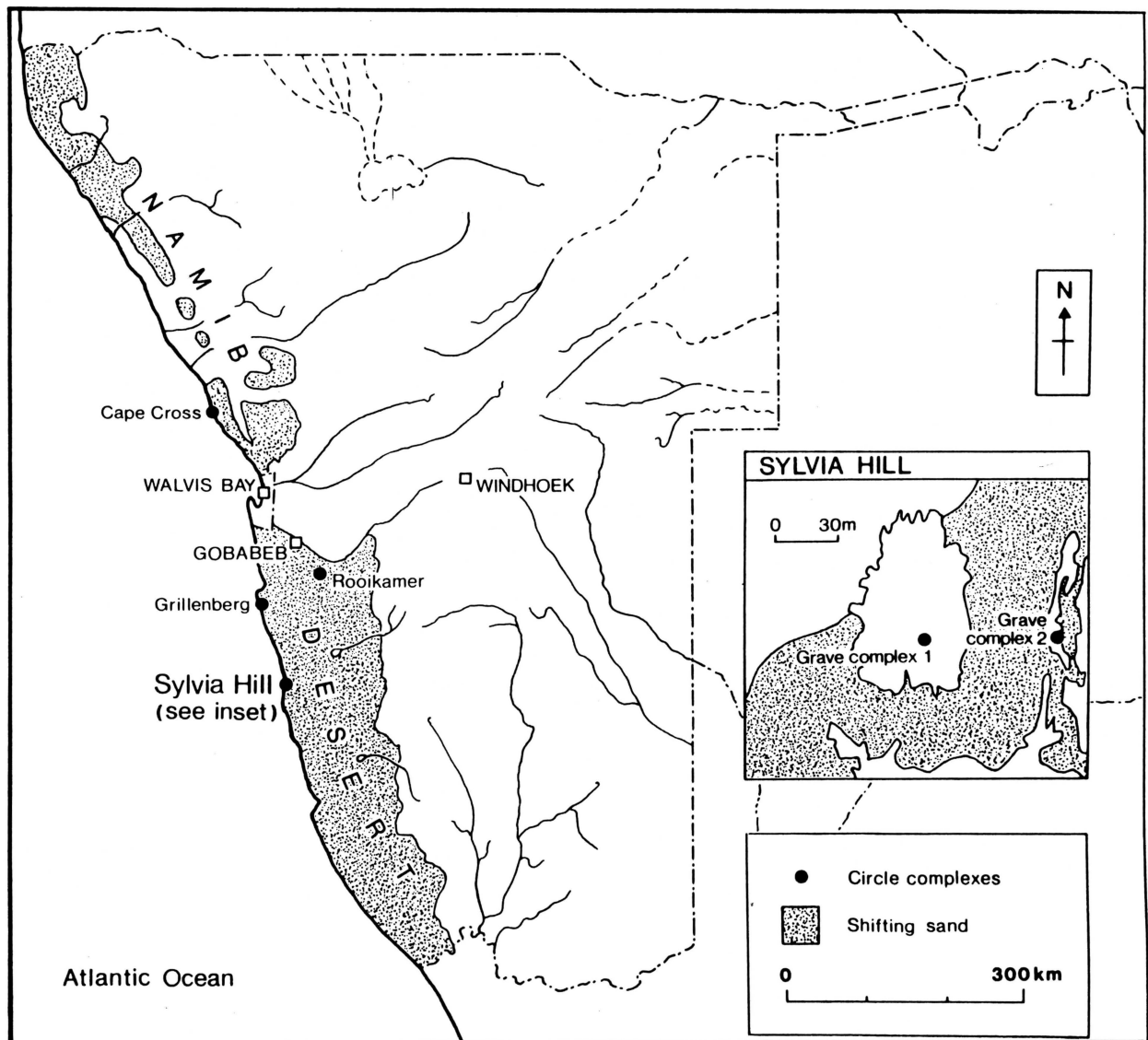


Figure 1. Location of Sylvania Hill on the coast of Namibia at 25°03'3., 14°54'E

58 hut circles (Fig. 2) in various constructional styles and degrees of collapse; the presence of some small stone mounds was noted. Similar conical piles of stones 0.3-0.8m high had been observed from the Zerissene Mountain circle complex (Carr *et al.* 1978) and interpreted as marker cairns. It was therefore thought worthwhile to remove these cairns, after plotting the circles, in the hope of obtaining dateable organic material which would illustrate the temporal range of the settlement. All three proved to conceal burials - two of adult males and one of a neonate. The bodies had apparently been compressed into

spaces in the rock floor of the circles beneath the cairns and weighed down with stones before being covered by additional material derived either from the collapse of the circle or from deliberate dismantling of the circle to bury its former inhabitant. There were no associated grave goods. All three skeletons were cleaned, drawn, planned, photographed, removed and packed in sandboxes for transport to Johannesburg, but it was felt that since the object of the expedition was to plot the surface distribution of shelters no further clearance should be undertaken since the re-use of circles for burials was clearly com-

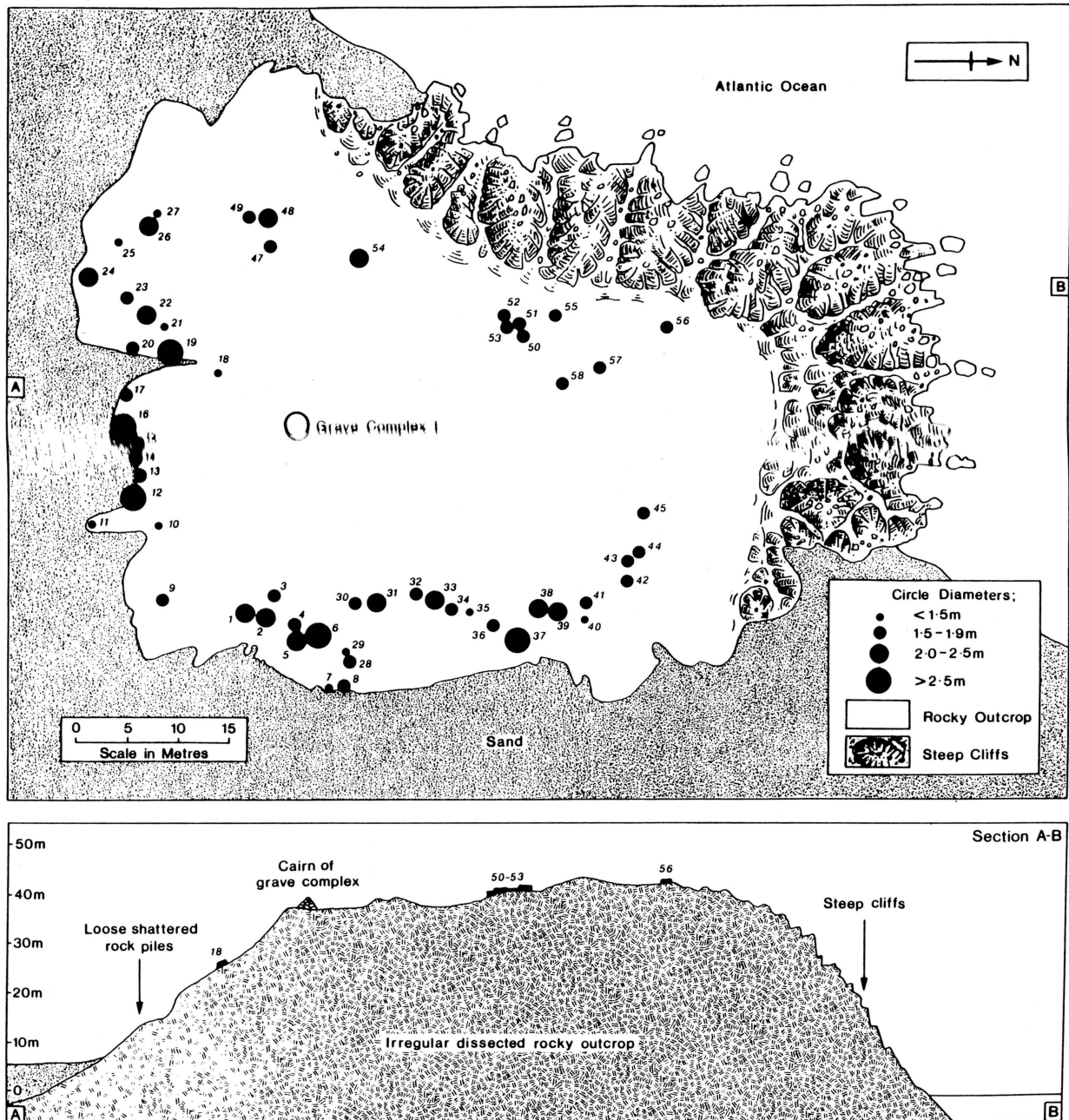


Figure 2. Circle distribution at Sylvia Hill and location of grave complex 1.

monplace in this area, although not noted before.

## II. 'THE BURIALS'

**Grave complex I.** An apparently collapsed hut circle complex covering an area of 3m<sup>2</sup> near the apex of the rock outcrop (Fig. 2) contained a stone 'cairn' some 0.70m high constructed from the remains of two collapsed shelters. The two graves revealed by the removal of the cairn were spatially distinct, although filled with blown sand and rock packing. Grave 1 (Fig. 3c) contained the remains of an immature male aged 17-23 years, compressed into a depression in the rock floor some 45x30cm in size. It was accompanied by a much smaller grave (Fig. 3b) with the fragmentary remains of a neonate.

The cranium and mandible were well preserved and complete with the exception of some post-depositional erosion, and G1 had his complete permanent dentition with the exception of the postmortem loss of I<sub>1</sub> (left) and M<sub>3</sub> (right), A x i a l postcranial remains included vertebrae (7 cervical, 10 thoracic, 3 lumbar), the sacrum, 22 ribs,

manubrium, and sternum. The appendicular skeleton was represented by 2 clavicles, the right scapula together with fragments of the left, a complete set of long bones with isolated epiphyses, right ischium, complete carpal and metacarpal bones, 24 phalanges, 1 calcaneum, 2 tali, 7 other tarsal bones, 10 (complete) metatarsal, 14 phalanges and 1 patella. Features of the skull and ilium suggested that the remains were male, and the platymeric index ( $100\text{FeD}_1/\text{FeD}_2\lambda = 84.2\%$ ) indicated flattening of the femoral shaft which was not evident in the tibial shaft ( $100\text{TID}_2/\text{TID}_1 = 87\%$ ). Flattening of the shafts has, in the past, been specifically associated with San (Bushman) populations. However, Lisowski (1968) showed that this flattening resulted from nutritional deficiencies which affected the structure of the bones and so influenced the osseous resistance to the stresses of locomotion. The cranium was small with slight facial projection ( $100\text{GL}/\text{LB} = 98.9\%$ ), a relatively broad palate ( $100 \times \text{G2}'/\text{G1}' = 88\%$ ) and a low squat mandibular ramus (rameal index  $100\text{rb}'/\text{rl} = 77.5\%$ ) indicative of a Khoisan individual. This identification was supported by the small mastoid process, shallow digastric fossa, delicate tympanic plate and the contour of the dental arcade.

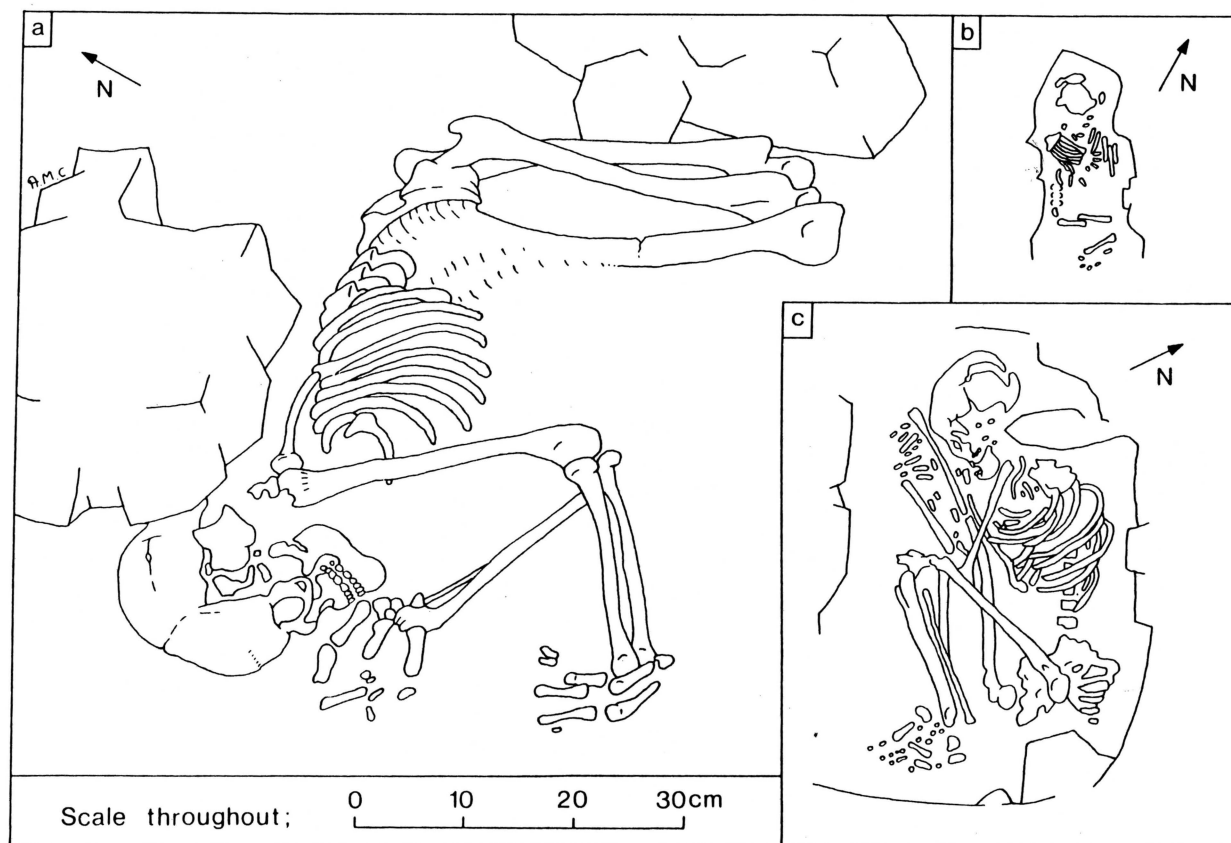


Figure 3. a. Male Khoisan skeleton G2, b. Neonate, skeleton G3, c. Male Khoisan burial G1, All burials are drawn to the same scale.

The remains of the neonate, skeleton G3, were very fragile, and occupied a grave only 25cm long in close proximity to the grave of G1 and less than 7cm deep. The cranial remains (represented by the right frontal, fragments of the parietal and occipital bones, the body and left greater wing of the sphenoid, and the right and left zygomatic bones) were too fragmentary to permit any comment on population affinities. Half the mandible was also present together with the following pieces of the postcranial skeleton: Axial - 20 complete vertebrae, 42 lateral pieces. Complete set of 24 ribs, manubrium and 3 sternbrae. Appendicular - 2 clavicles, left scapula, 2 humeri, the proximal ends of the 2 ulnae, femora, left tibia, 2 fibulae, 2 ilia, and only 8 metacarpal/tarsal bones which, with 8 phalanges, represented the entire remains of the hands and feet. Loss of bones was apparently caused by *in situ* weathering in the damp sandy fill of the grave.

**Grave 2 complex.** During the cleaning of another hut circle (No. 297) situated on a small rock outcrop some 75m east of the main 'island' (Fig. 1) a second grave was revealed, also concealed by a stone pile filling the circle (Fig. 3a). This contracted burial was of a much larger adult Khoisan male, aged 25-35 years, which had also been buried in a contracted position and was much damaged by erosion and crushing from the weight of rocks. The cranial vault showed premature closure of the sagittal suture. The mandible was nearly complete, as was the permanent dentition. All teeth except the third molars showed wear with dentine exposure. The postcranial skeleton was represented as follows: axial - 6 cervical vertebrae, 7 thoracic, fragments of 6 others, 3 lumbar vertebrae plus 2 other fragments, fragments of the sacrum, 17 ribs, manubrium and 2 sternbrae. Appendicular - 2 clavicles, 2 fragmented scapulae, humeri, radii, ulnae, femora, tibiae, all the long bones being fractured, together with fragmentary handbones (9 carpal, 7 metacarpal) and footbones (2 calcanei, 2 tali, 8 other tarsal, 6 metatarsal bones, 26 phalanges). The vertebral bodies showed bony lipping, there was evidence of a healed fracture on the 2nd metacarpal. The remains suggested a fully adult individual aged 23-35 at the time of death. No nutritional deficiencies were apparent, and features of the skull and postcranial skeleton suggest that G2 was a male. The estimated living stature is 158cm. The cranial vault was small (L = 181cm) and narrow, and the cranial base missing, giving an incomplete facial skeleton. However, the face appeared to be non-projecting with a low mandible and relatively broad ramus (rameal index  $100 \text{ rb}'/\text{rl} \text{ } 69.1\%$ ) indicative of a Khoisan skull.

To consider further the assignment of the more complete G1 remains to the Khoisan population group, Penrose's (1954) distance statistic was applied to the

data obtained for G1 and for five comparative male series, viz. San (Bushman), Natal Nguni, Cape Nguni, Sotho, Shangana-Tonga (Southern African Negro groups). The values obtained indicated that G1 has closer affinities with the San group than with any one of the Negro groups, especially with respect to the shape component of the statistic.

### III. CHRONOLOGY

A radiocarbon date of  $510 \pm 45\text{BP}$  (Pta-3294) was obtained from collagen from G1, but it was not possible to date the associated neonate as this would have required virtually the whole skeleton. The second skeleton, G2, was dated at  $1070 \pm 60\text{BP}$  (Pta-3295) which showed it to be much older.

### IV. DISCUSSION

The wide disparity in the dates (nearly 500 years) between these two major burials suggests that the Sylvia Hill hut circle complex was in use by Khoisan people for a long period; a range of nearly 800 years is indicated by the dates obtained on charcoal samples from circles 20 and 29.

It seems likely that the circle complex was located in response to the availability of fresh water and ample supplies of molluscan food, together with shelter from the prevailing onshore winds. Circles seem to have been used on an opportunistic basis for burial if the need arose. The lack of grave goods and the contracted posture are common features of Khoisan burials, but in this case the contracted position is also related to the necessity for compressing the bodies into the relatively small available spaces in the rock floors. It seems likely that the bodies were then covered with stones, in order to deter scavengers such as the brown hyaena, and that the graves filled naturally with blown sand. Although no other archaeological material was associated with these burials, surface artefact scatters including pottery are of a type widely recognised in south-west Africa and dated to  $490 \pm 50$  (Pta-2295) at Hottentot Bay ( $26^{\circ}09'S$ ,  $14^{\circ}58'E$ ). Kolb (1719) first reported a comparable intact adult skeleton buried in sand in a crouched position which was recently dated to  $710 \pm 50$  (Pta-1863) (Vogel and Visser 1981) from Conception Bay (Fig. 1)  $24^{\circ}01'S$ ,  $14^{\circ}34'E$ , where fresh water is also available at c. 3m depth, and where the site also seems to have been visited over many centuries during this millennium in connection with the exploitation of marine food resources.

## V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to Professor Hertha de Villiers (Department of General Anatomy, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) for her report on these three skeletons, and to Dr. J.C. Vogel (C.S.I.R. Pretoria) for undertaking the radiocarbon dates. The expedition to Sylvia Hill was undertaken with colleagues from the Desert Ecological Research Unit at Gobabeb, under the direction of Dr. M.K. Seely, to whom the writer is much indebted. Mrs. P. de Villiers kindly transported the skeletal remains to Johannesburg; Leon Jacobson (State Museum, Windhoek) provided advice and assistance; fieldwork was financed by grants from the Boise Fund (University of Oxford), the British Academy and the L.S.B. Leakey Foundation; and permission kindly granted by the Division of Nature Conservation and Tourism (South West Africa) and Consolidated Diamond Mines. The illustrations are the work of Andy Clark.

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