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Grave VIa at Oakhurst Shelter: Reporting on a 5000-year-old mistaken identity and associated grave-goods

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ABSTRACT
Almost a century ago, Goodwin excavated Grave VIa at Oakhurst Shelter that later became known as one of the most intriguing Later Stone Age burials in southern Africa. At the time, and in subsequent discussions, it was thought that a man was buried with a bored stone and a grindstone – objects usually seen as women's things. We now know that the person was buried ~5000 years ago during the mid-Holocene, and that recent genetic work revealed their biological identity as that of a woman. This report reconciles the woman's bioarchaeological information with a photographic record of her grave goods, most of which have never been published before. It highlights how throughout its long curational history, originally well-contextualised items are now scattered, with some no longer traceable. Alongside the items I was able to record over a three-year period, I provide a list of 'still missing' items in the hope that it will lead to their re-location. Brief interpretations of some aspects of the grave goods (such as the bored stone with fish vertebrae, the quartz artefacts, and the ochre and paint paraphernalia) serve to highlight the uniqueness of this grave, and its potential to inform on the woman and the possible worldview of the people who lived at Oakhurst Shelter during the mid-Holocene.

Keywords: Stone Age burials; ancient-DNA; bored stone; pigment-making; quartz crystals

1. Introduction

When studied archaeologically, ancient grave goods have an extraordinary potential to inform on past peoples and their worldviews (e.g., Alekshin et al. 1983; Cooper et al. 2022). In South Africa, many Stone Age graves were excavated during the first half of the 20th century amidst quests for 'missing links' and racial traits (Morris 2022), generally with little archaeological interpretation of the accompanying grave goods. The long and mostly poorly documented curatorial histories furthermore resulted in the splitting or comingling of grave contents – both human and material remains (e.g., Lazarides 2015; Steyn et al. 2024). It is therefore rare to find fully reconciled and well-documented records of individual sets of Stone Age grave goods although certain aspects are highlighted in overviews or comparative studies (Inskeep 1986; Hall & Binneman 1987; Wadley 1997; Pearce 2008; Lazarides 2015; Loftus & Pfeiffer 2024). The aim of this contribution is to report on the status of arguably one of the most interesting and complex sets of mid-Holocene, Later Stone Age grave goods in South Africa, and the recent genetically confirmed sex of the person buried with them at Oakhurst in Grave VIa.

2. Oakhurst Shelter and Grave VIa

Oakhurst Shelter is an overhang of ~15 m long in an east-facing sandstone cliff, located in the forest along the Klein Keurbooms River about 6.5 km from the ocean just north of the coastal lakes between George and Knysna (Fig. 1a). Between 1932 and 1935, Goodwin (1937a) excavated the southern end of the shelter to bedrock. He interpreted the Later Stone Age sequence from top to bottom as follows: late Wilton with pottery, developed Wilton with no pottery, normal Wilton, Smithfield 'C', and Smithfield 'B' (Goodwin 1937a). In Table 1 I present Goodwin's chrono-stratigraphy for Oakhurst Shelter, compared to our current understanding of the southern African Later Stone Age sequence (Deacon 1984; Lombard et al. 2012, 2022; for detailed historical discussion of Oakhurst Shelter see Pearce 2008: 186-192).

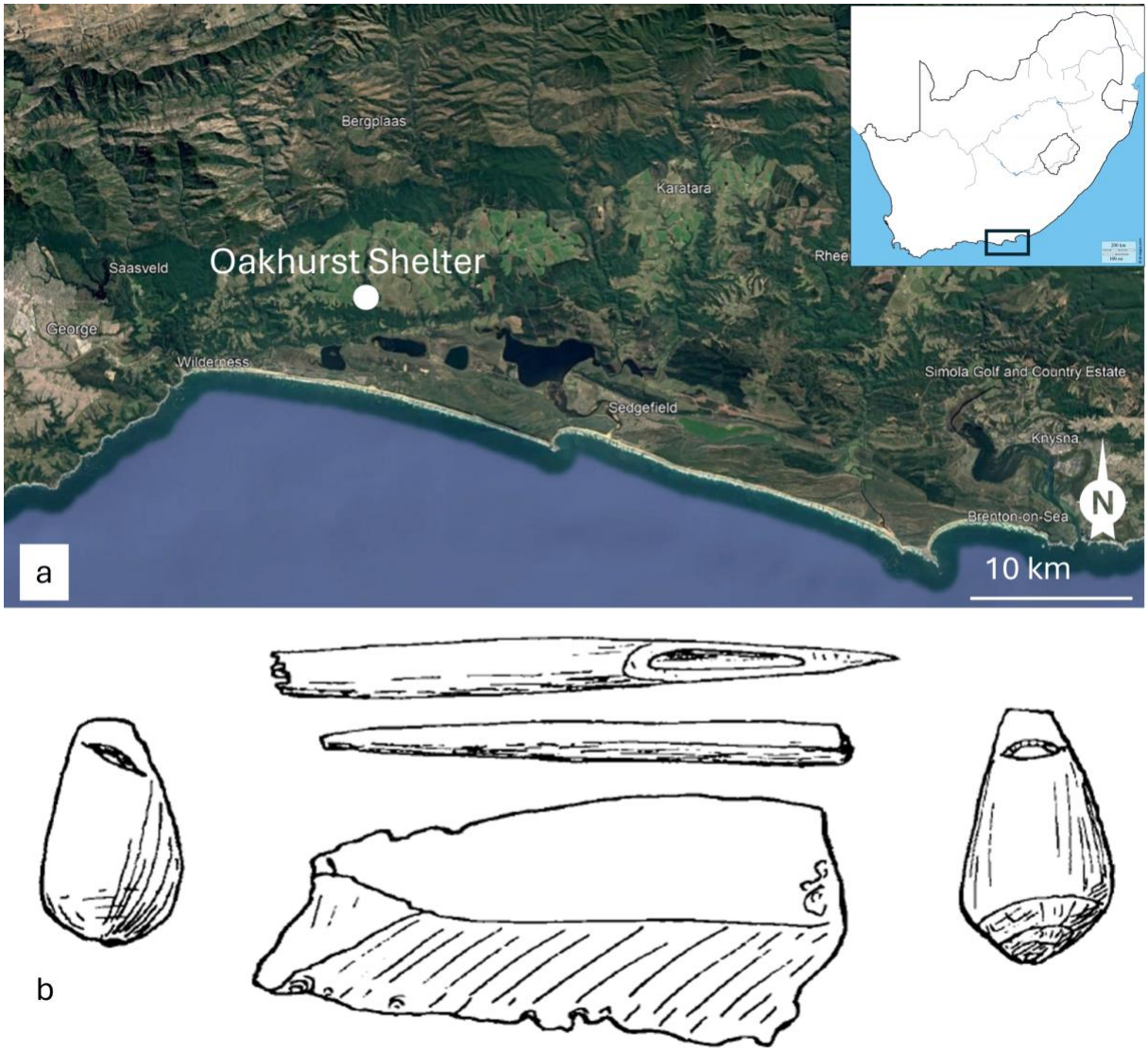

Figure 1. Location of Oakhurst Shelter (a), and Goodwin's sketch of artefacts associated with Grave VIa including bone arrow-points, pierced/incised *Conus* shells, and a Mossel Bay-type flake (b; adapted from Goodwin 1937b: 251).

Researchers who subsequently attempted to study the Oakhurst assemblages revealed difficulties with context and curational control (e.g., Fagan 1960; Schrire 1962; Sampson 1974; Wadley 1997; Pearce 2008). It seems that initially the material was housed at the University of Cape Town African Studies Museum, where it was studied by Fagan (1960) and Schrire (1962), and that Schrire reorganised and relabelled the assemblage. According to her (Schrire 1962: 183):

> [I]t is unlikely that the horizontal limits of the terraces should coincide with the interfaces of the cultural deposits. These discrepancies prevent a full understanding of the excavation. Moreover, since Goodwin provides no key for identifying the labels on the material, they can only be deduced from the report. The inconsistencies found in this report have made this task even more difficult. The unlabelled material from Oakhurst cannot be incorporated in an analysis since its stratigraphical position is unknown. It is only when an unmistakable object, which has been described and illustrated in the report, is found that we can allot it a place in the sequence of finds. For example, an ivory point bearing no label is ascribed to grave six.

Table 1. Goodwin's (1937a, c) Later Stone Age sequence at Oakhurst compared to the current sequence based on dated Later Stone Age assemblages from across southern Africa (Deacon 1984; Lombard et al. 2012, 2022).

Goodwin 1937a, c		**Deacon 1984; Lombard et al. 2012, 2022**	
Technocomplex	**Goodwin's description for Oakhurst Shelter**	**Technocomplex**	**Description**
Pottery Wilton 0-9 inches	Pottery varied and abundant. Many sherds are thin, burnt black on both faces; while many are thick, sandy, and crude. All show white quartz inclusions; some of the clay used was sandy. Decorations vary, and all consist of incised lines in different parallel hatchings that never cross, and are confined to the neck. Stone implements are not abundant, with the most common type being a waterworn pebble fragment, with a straight scraper-edge worked across one end. There is a general formlessness and crudity about the white quartz tools, but carefully formed scrapers, rectangular to circular in shape, were made on pebbles of quartzitic sandstone. A few Wilton crescents, small circular scrapers, end-scrapers, and burin-like forms were also recovered. A lower grindstone made on a river pebble and a number of upper grindstones of the same material are from this layer. Vast numbers of ostrich eggshell beads were retrieved. Few fragments of yellow and claret ochre were found, with a broken hematite nodule from which powdered ochre had been obtained. Whole and worked sea-shells (including crescents) are common. Contains worked ivory and bone.	ceramic final Later Stone Age, <2000 years ago, probably 97-1493 CE	Includes grit- or grass-tempered pottery that can be coarse, or well-fired and thin-walled; sometimes with lugs, spouts and conical bases; sometimes with decoration; sometimes shaped as bowls. Stone tool assemblages are often microlithic, and in some areas dominated by long end-scrapers, but also include few backed microliths; in other areas formal tools are absent or rare. Grindstones are common. Ochre and ostrich eggshell are common, and metal objects and glass beads may occur.
Developed Wilton 9-35 inches	Pottery ceases altogether yet shell crescents are abundant. Much of the same series of hammer-stones, some chipped, some slightly scarred and pecked, comes from this level. The pebble tools are similar to those above. A fragment of bored stone was found. A fine large circular scraper and a few stone crescents and small circular ("thumbnail'') scrapers make up the remainder of the stone implements. The shell and ostrich eggshell ornaments are as much as in the context above. Various *Mytilus* crescents and about one hundred ostrich eggshell beads were collected. No bone tools.	final Later Stone Age (regional variants: Smithfield, Kabeljous or Wilton), ~100-4000 years ago, probably 632 CE-1948 BCE	Much variability can be expected. Variants include macrolithic assemblages that are mostly informal, often characterised by large, untrimmed flakes. Microlithic scrapers, blades and bladelets, backed tools and adzes may occur. Worked bone, ochre, and ostrich eggshell are common. Metal objects are rare, and ceramics are absent.
Normal Wilton 36 inches	Many beautifully made stone crescents and several thumbnail scrapers. Ostrich eggshell beads, but no bone, shell or ivory tools, were recovered. A fine pair of rectangular nacre beads was found with the Wilton material. Several ovals of cut *Turbo* shell come from this level, and these seem to represent the work of an expert in this material. While it would be useless to suggest that the contents of this shallow Normal Wilton layer present the full gamut of the local Wilton, it is at least representative and corresponds with the regional variation to be expected at such a site. It is sufficient to show that the Normal Wilton was represented in this shelter at this particular period.	Wilton, ~4000-8000 years ago, probably, 2686-5834 BCE	A fully developed microlithic tradition with numerous formal tools, highly standardised backed microliths often made from blades/bladelets and small convex scrapers. Ochre and ostrich eggshell are common, and bone, shell and wooden artefacts occur.
Smithfield C 36-60 inches	Vast numbers of typical Smithfield scrapers (end scrapers, circular scrapers, thumbnail scrapers, etc.). There are some two hundred flakes of brown chalcedony, yet in only a dozen instances has any attempt been made to trim these into implements. There are four or five large flakes resembling Mossel Bay forms. A few stone crescents are also present. Other finds include: polished or ground stones, grooved stones, stone beads and palettes, shell ornaments, large numbers of ostrich eggshell beads, and some bone tools.	Oakhurst (regional variants: Albany, Lockshoek, Kuruman), ~7000-12 000 years ago, probably 6755-10 839 BCE	A flake-based industry characterised by round, end, and D-shaped scrapers and adzes and few or no microliths. A wide range of polished bone tools occur.
Smithfield B 60-77 inches	All implements are still of the general scraper family, varying much in size. Few ostrich eggshell beads. Formal implements disappearing.		

Goodwin (1937b) reported Grave VIa as one of a palimpsest of six individual burials (VI and VIa-e), describing Grave VIa as (Goodwin 1937b: 250-252):

> An earlier interment underlying VI. It had its own gravestones, three of which bore signs of red ochre, but no paint. The skull was that of an adult, very much rotted, apparently through contact with Skeleton VI, and through having been crushed by the gravestones. The skeleton lay on its right side, facing east, head to south. Four or five Wilton crescents of stone serve to date the

> burial as Early Wilton, buried from 36-inch layer. On the right thigh, with marked signs of red ochre in the surrounding earth, lay an oval bored stone pierced down its major axis. One end contained broken fragments of a mass of black resinous substance; the other end contained an unbroken series of fish vertebrae. A red-ochre powder coloured the area between this bored stone and an upper grindstone. Near the bored stone lay four pierced *Conus* shells and three pieces of ironstone (probably from the surface of the 300-foot peneplain above), which had apparently formed part of a girdle about the waist. On the right wrist, which had been forced against the sternum, was found a bracelet, consisting of an intricate band of ostrich eggshell beads, 1.5 inches wide, with beads in position. The wristlet was photographed, and fixed in wax for future development. Behind the pelvis, under a large stone with red paint on it, were three river pebbles about 3 inches [in] diameter with red ochre on them. With these was a mass of powdered ochre mixed with soil, also two water-worn flakes of Mossel Bay type, half a broken palette, a large crystal worked as a circular scraper, a few Donax shells filled with red ochre, and a crushed ostrich eggshell bored at one end. The whole grave was lined with sea-grass. Near the skeleton, and apparently belonging to it, were found two more slate palettes, two bone arrow-points, and a mass of black resinous-material. This latter bears the imprint of a flake, and of a thin bone about 3/16-inch in diameter. The superficial similarity of the resinous mass to that found in the bored stone suggests that they belong to the same grave. […] Whether the water-tortoise is a part of the disturbed burial [VIe] or of that of VIa is uncertain. It is more probably related to VIa.

Goodwin (1937b) ascribed Grave VIa as belonging to the Wilton phase at Oakhurst Shelter (Table 1), and based on stature, Drennan (1937a) interpreted the post-cranial bones and skull of Oakhurst 6A as that of an adult male.

3. More about the person buried at Oakhurst in Grave VIa

Wadley (1997) found that in Goodwin's fieldnotes he described the grave goods for 6A as those later published for Grave VIa (Goodwin 1937b) – so that the simultaneously published 6A skeleton (Drennan 1937a) belonged to Grave VIa. She writes (Wadley 1997: 133 note 5):

> Drennan (1938) identified skeleton 6A as male but Patrick (1989) identified skeleton 6a number 1 (UCT 204), which she claims comes from Grave 6a, as female. This skeleton was dated 4530+70 bp (Pta-4449). There is some doubt that these descriptions are of the same skeleton, and Pfeiffer (personal communication 1995) reported that UCT 204 comprises only the commingled feet of more than one adult. Given this apparent recent confusion over the identity of UCT 204, I am retaining Drennan's original identification. When I examined the Oakhurst Shelter grave goods at the South African Museum [now IZIKO South African Museum] and at the University of Cape Town Medical School [now University of Cape Town Department of Human Biology], the Grave 6A grave goods were missing. It is possible that Skeleton 6A is also missing.

In 1992 Morris (1992: 47), however, described UCT 204 as comprising "most of [the] skeleton of [an] adult". Sealy et al. (1992) reported on the health of six teeth for an adult woman accessioned as UCT 204 (radiocarbon lab. no. Pta-4449). According to Sealy (Judith Sealy pers. comm. June 2025), her sex interpretation would probably have been based on at least a partial pelvis, and Patrick (1989) indicated that she used pelvic and cranial traits for sexing. The presence of at least partial pelvic bones seems plausible based on Goodwin's (1937b) observation about artefacts found behind the pelvis in Grave VIa. By contrast, Drennan's (1937a) sexing was based on stature, and Stock and Pfeiffer (2001: 339) also interpreted the UCT 204 adult as male "based on non-pelvic indicators". It seems that after the 1995 communication between Wadley and Pfeiffer, Pfeiffer had another look at UCT 204, making the following note: "July 1996: This is Drennan's Grave VIa [note however that Drennan used '6A' and Goodwin 'VIa']: Wadley requested that I check the sex: Right humerus head: 37 [mm]; left humerus head: 38 [mm]; scrappy, partial un-sided femoral head: 45 mm. Can't see any pelvic material. General large size of long bones. Tentative-probable male". Thus, based on the size of the femur head, the person was not small, and may have had the stature of a typical man within the community (Susan Pfeiffer pers. comm. June 2025).

Sealy (2010) further conducted isotope analysis on UCT 204 bone samples at the University of Cape Town Department of Archaeology, and samples for DNA analysis were recently extracted from two teeth belonging to UCT 204 (radiocarbon lab. no. Pta-4449) (Gretzinger et al. 2024: s1). The crowns of the teeth have since been returned to the Department of Human Biology (Judith Sealy pers. comm. June 2025). The ancient DNA of UCT 204 revealed the genetic sex as that of a woman (Gretzinger et al. 2024), corresponding with Patrick's (1989) and Sealy et al.'s (1992) interpretations. Cumulatively, the various studies demonstrate that UCT 204 does not consist of foot bones only, instead it seems likely that at the time of Wadley's visit to IZIKO and the Department of Human Biology, some of the UCT 204 bones were elsewhere for research purposes and that subsequently Pfeiffer also found other bones. Currently, UCT 204 as curated by the University of Cape Town Department of Human Biology consists of a full skeletal box including a skull cap, teeth, and well-preserved distal and proximal portions of tibia and femora, and there are many more fragmented bones with well-preserved portions (Victoria Gibbon pers. comm. June 2025; see Table 2 for elements with previously published measurements).

Pearce (2008) thought that some of the confusion may stem from the various numbering systems used for the Oakhurst material, but from two catalogue notes at the Department of Human Biology he confirmed that the UCT 204 adult remains were those reported by Drennan (1937a) as '6A' – thus the adult from Goodwin's Grave VIa (Goodwin 1937b). Patrick (1989) identified the UCT 204 adult (labelled by her as both '6a' and 'no1') as a woman of 30-39 years upon death, buried at 162 cm, and dated to 4530±70 bp (Pta-4449). In Goodwin's (1937b) report, Grave VIa is the only adult burial found at a depth of 64 inches (162.56 cm). Patrick (1989) noted three more individuals associated with UCT 204 (unlabelled) for whom age and sex estimates were impossible. Sealy et al. (1992) also reported on one adult (radiocarbon lab. no. Pta-4449), one juvenile of 4-5 years and three intermediate sets of remains for UCT 204. These remains may relate to Goodwin's (1937b) Graves VIb-e mainly consisting of fragmented child bones (also see Morris 1992). Patrick (1989) goes on to report on the teeth associated with UCT 204. Here, UCT 204 (unlabelled) is a tooth specimen with caries and a C13 value of -14.46, but UCT 204 (grave 11) is a tooth without caries and a C13 value of -13.59. Patrick's (1989) carbon-nitrogen data show that UCT 204 (grave 11) with its -13.59 C13 value has a nitrogen value of 13.24, and that it is the 30-39-year-old woman whom she previously labelled 'UCT 204 no1' and 'UCT 204 6a'. The UCT 204 (unlabelled, C13=-14.46) entry has a nitrogen value of 10.09 and is a child of 4-5 years old. Patrick's (1989) labelling system creates further muddle when she also uses 'grave 11' and 'GRAVE 11' with UCT 209/186 buried at 177 cm. On page 192, Patrick (1989), however, links her 'Grave 6a' and UCT 204 buried at a depth of 162 cm, as associated with the grave goods described by Goodwin (1937b) for Grave VIa buried at the same depth.

As for the grave goods, I found that some objects marked with 'O. 6a' (O.=Oakhurst) correspond to objects found in Grave VIa by Goodwin (1937b), so that the '6a' tag may have been introduced during Schrire's (1962) relabelling of the Oakhurst assemblage. By carefully following all available data (i.e., Goodwin's original descriptions [for his photographic record see below], burial depths, UCT accession numbers, radiocarbon laboratory numbers and research histories), it now seems most likely that the sexing of 6A/UCT 204 based on stature suggests a relatively tall person (162-163.2 cm; Drennan 1937a). Here it is important to note that according to Pfeiffer (2021), femoral length measures (where available) suggest that there was not much difference in stature amongst southern African hunter-gatherer adults. Ultimately, based on cranial and/or pelvic bones, as well as on DNA, the sex of the adult buried in Oakhurst Grave VIa was revealed as female. We recently recalibrated the burial date of this rather tall woman to 3290-2560 BCE or 5240-4510 BP (Pta-4449) (Loftus et al. 2024), and we now also know that she carries the L0d1b2b2a mitochondrial subclade in her DNA (Gretzinger et al. 2024; Fig. 2 orange label). Based on the published range of isotope data (Patrick 1989; Sealy & Pfeiffer 2000; Sealy 2010), it seems that her diet was most consistent with those of South African inland hunter-gatherers, relatively high in meat intake, perhaps supplemented with fresh-water foods, but generally low in plant-food intake (see fig. 12 in Steyn et al. 2023). Table 2 provides a summary of the currently available bioarchaeological data for the woman found at Oakhurst in Grave VIa.

Table 2. Summary of the published bioarchaeological data associated with the adult buried in Oakhurst Grave VIa at a depth of 162 cm.

Unit measured	Result	Source
Radiocarbon date on collagen	4530±70 bp (Pta-4449)	Patrick 1989
Calibrated radiocarbon date	3290-2560 BCE or 5240-4510 BP	Loftus et al. 2024
Person's age estimate	30-39 years	Patrick 1989
Genetic sex	Female	Gretzinger et al. 2024
Cranial/pelvic sex	Female	Patrick 1989; Sealy pers. comm. June 2025
Long-bone trait sex	Male	Drennan 1937a; Stock & Pfeiffer 2001
mtDNA Haplogroup	L0d1b2b2a	Gretzinger et al. 2024
Skull maximum length	184 mm	Drennan 1937a
Skull maximum breadth	132 mm	Drennan 1937a
Cranial index	72	Drennan 1937a
Number of carious teeth	1 out of 6	Sealy et al. 1992
Un-sided humerus length	319 mm	Drennan 1937a
Right humerus head diameter	37 mm	Pfeiffer pers. comm. June 2025
Left humerus head diameter	38 mm	Pfeiffer pers. comm. June 2025
Radio-humera1 index	77	Drennan 1937a
Un-sided radius length	244 mm	Drennan 1937a
Un-sided femoral head diameter	45 mm	Pfeiffer pers. comm. June 2025
Un-sided tibia standard	345 mm	Drennan 1937a
Un-sided calcaneus length	67 mm	Drennan 1937a
Un-sided calcaneus breath	38 mm	Drennan 1937a
Un-sided talus length	43 mm	Drennan 1937a
Un-sided talus breadth	35 mm	Drennan 1937a
Stature Manouvrier estimate	1620 mm	Drennan 1937a
Stature Pearson estimate	1632 mm	Drennan 1937a
Carbon isotope value	-13.59	Patrick 1989
Carbon isotope value	-13.2	Sealy & Pfeiffer 2000
Carbon isotope value	-12.8	Sealy 2010
Nitrogen isotope value	13.24	Patrick 1989
Nitrogen isotope value	13.0	Sealy & Pfeiffer 2000
Nitrogen isotope value	12.8	Sealy 2010

Gretzinger et al.'s (2024) ancient-DNA study included nine individuals from the Oakhurst Shelter dated to between 9120 and 710 BP, and a study by Jakobsson et al. (2026) included 28 individuals dating to 10 200 and 150 BP. Both these studies demonstrate that different from most other regions across the globe, the genomes of ancient southern Africans show little spatiotemporal stratification, consistent with a large, stable Holocene population. Southern Africa seems to have been a long-standing geographic refugium since ~200 000 years ago (Rito et al. 2019), with fragmented gene outflow between ~100 000 and 8000 years ago and gene inflow only manifesting after ~1400 years ago from eastern and western Africa, and later from Europe (Jakobsson et al. 2026). The genetic signature of the Oakhurst hunter-gatherers provides evidence of their ancestry to current #Khomani San and Karretjiemense from South Africa, and all the successfully reconstructed mtDNA (mitochondrial DNA) libraries from Oakhurst belong to the L0d haplogroup (Gretzinger et al. 2024). This haplogroup is shared with individuals from KwaZulu-Natal who lived there about 2000 years ago (Schlebusch et al. 2017, 2020) and is one of the most ancient mitochondrial lineages globally that coalesced sometime between 133 000 and 90 000 years ago (Chan et al. 2015). Figure 2 is a simplified representation of the >100 ka mtDNA lineage of the woman buried in Grave VIa.

The L0d haplotypes found in the southern San today are clearly distinguishable from northern groups (Schlebusch et al. 2013). The L0d1b branch, only detected in southern Africa, has higher frequencies in the south of the region, declining towards the north (Fig. 2 map on the left). The Ju/'hoansi and Cape Coloured groups in the Schlebusch et al. (2013) study had L0d1b as their most prevalent L0d haplogroup, occurring at lower frequencies in the !Xun (Fig. 2). Chan et al. (2015) found relatively elevated L0d1b frequencies in #Khomani San. This ancestral lineage appears to have been highly dispersed throughout southern Africa, showing expansion dates during MIS 2 at ~15 000 years ago, and again at ~3000 years ago during the late Holocene (Schlebusch et al. 2013). Its subsequent variant, L0d1b2 predominates within the San population today, and the woman from Grave VIa carries the L0d1b2b2a subclade (Gretzinger et al. 2024), which is most closely related to current San-predominant subclades such as L0d1b2a2, L0d1b2b1a and L0d1b2b2c (Chan et al. 2015). She, together with other individuals dating to at least the last 10 000 years (e.g., Schlebusch et al. 2017, 2020; Gretzinger et al.

2024; Jakobsson et al. 2026), is therefore a direct ancestor of people who currently self-identify as San or Bushman (also see D'Amato et al. 2025).

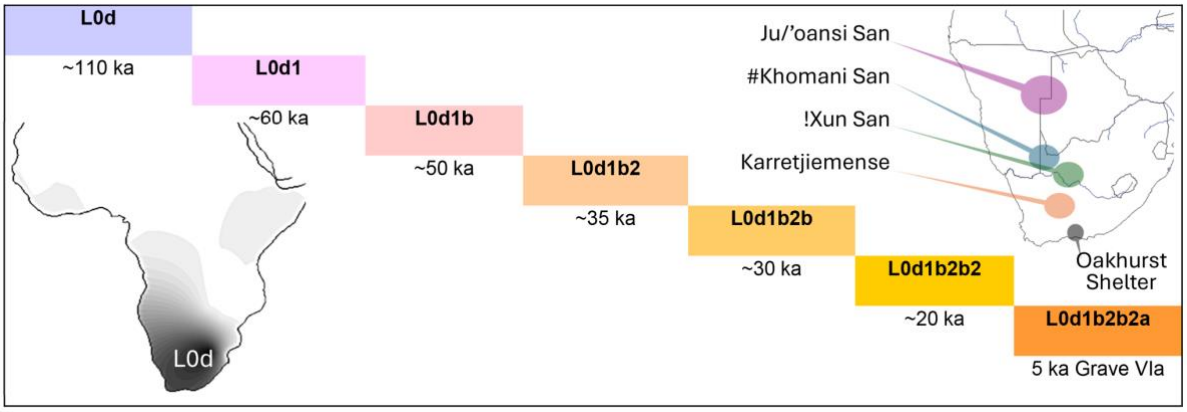

Figure 2. The >100 ka simplified mitochondrial DNA lineage of the woman buried in Grave VIa at Oakhurst, showing the different divergence age estimates compared to her burial date, a contour plot of the L0d frequency distribution in Africa (left), and the areas where current San groups with L0d1b as their most prevalent L0d haplogroup live as direct descendants of the older hunter-gatherer groups (right). Information compiled from Barbieri et al. (2013), Rito et al. (2013) and Chan et al. (2015).

4. Current status of the Oakhurst Grave VIa grave goods

Goodwin's photographic record of Grave VIa

During July-August 2024, Clive Kirkwood, the archivist at the University of Cape Town Libraries, located some of Goodwin's original photographs associated with Grave VIa. Goodwin (1937b: plate VB) published the photograph in Figure 3 (left) as that of the Grave VI complex. He (Goodwin 1937b: 249-250) found that the skull of Grave VI "was almost vertical" and "behind the skull, and touching it, was an ostrich eggshell, pierced with a 1/4-inch hole at one end [Fig. 3a], it overlayed the burial stones and skull of Grave VIa, with the VIa skull crushed by the stones and a decayed face [Fig 3b]" (Goodwin 1937b: 220).

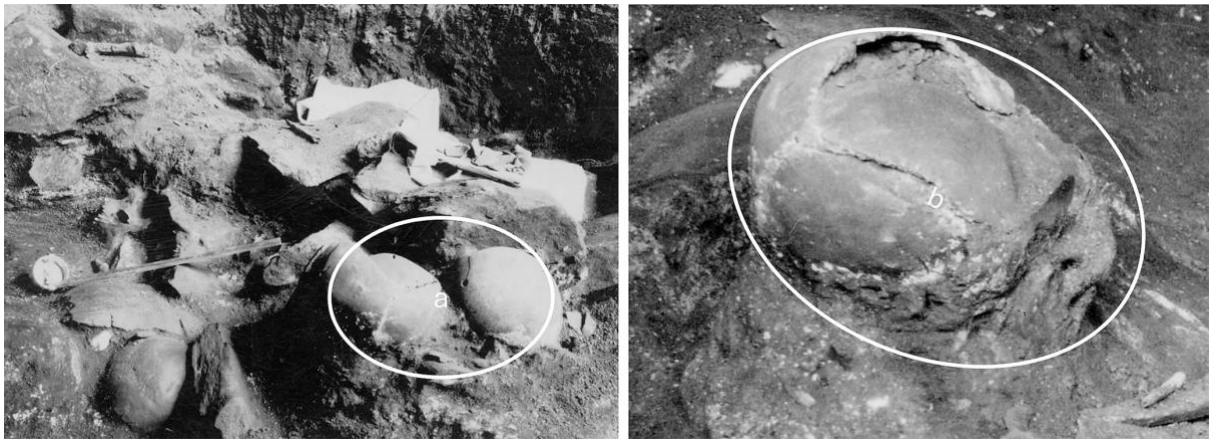

Figure 3. The Grave VI burial complex at Oakhurst. Vertically buried skull touching an ostrich eggshell water bottle (a; from Goodwin 1937b: plate VB); crushed skull and decayed face of the buried woman (b). Photographs used with permission of the University of Cape Town Library©.

Figure 4a shows the location of the bored stone on the woman's thigh, and the place against her sternum (Fig. 4b) where the right wrist with ostrich eggshell bead bracelet was fixed in wax by Goodwin and removed. Figure 4c shows the image published by Goodwin (1937b: plate VIIIB) which shows the ostrich eggshell bracelet.

The photograph in Figure 5 reveals how the upper grindstone mentioned by Goodwin was placed on the woman's chest (Fig. 5a), how the bored stone on her thigh left an impression in the soil after removal (Fig. 5b), and the location of one of the four *Conus* shells found next to it (Fig. 5c). The detail of a different photograph (Fig. 5d) shows another of the *Conus* shells next to the bored stone impression.

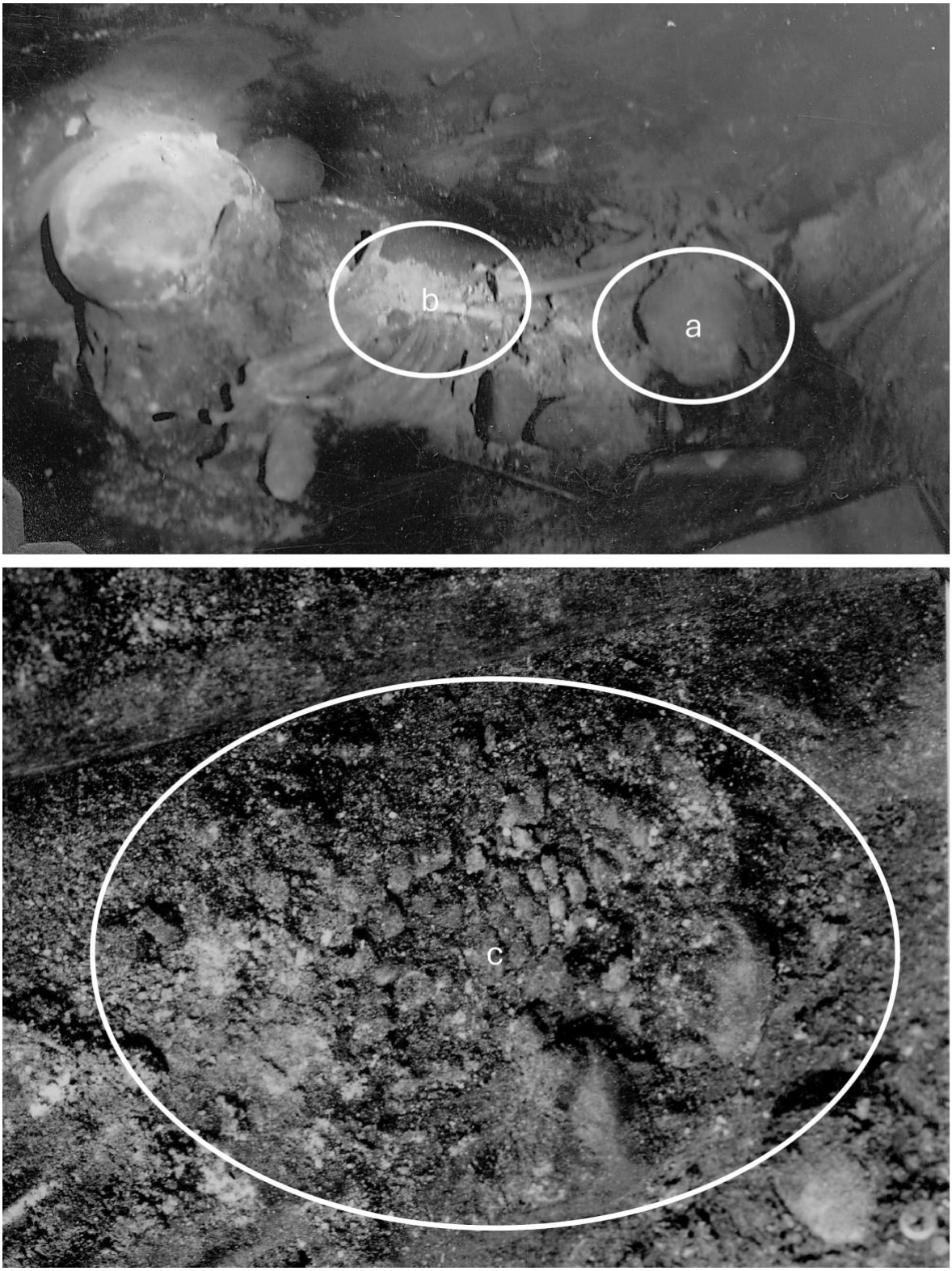

Figure 4. Top (not published before): Grave VIa with the bored stone on the woman's right thigh (a), and the place from which her wrist with ostrich eggshell bead bracelet was removed (b). Bottom (Goodwin 1937b: plate VIIIB): the wide, intricate ostrich eggshell bracelet (c). Photographs used with permission of the University of Cape Town Library©.

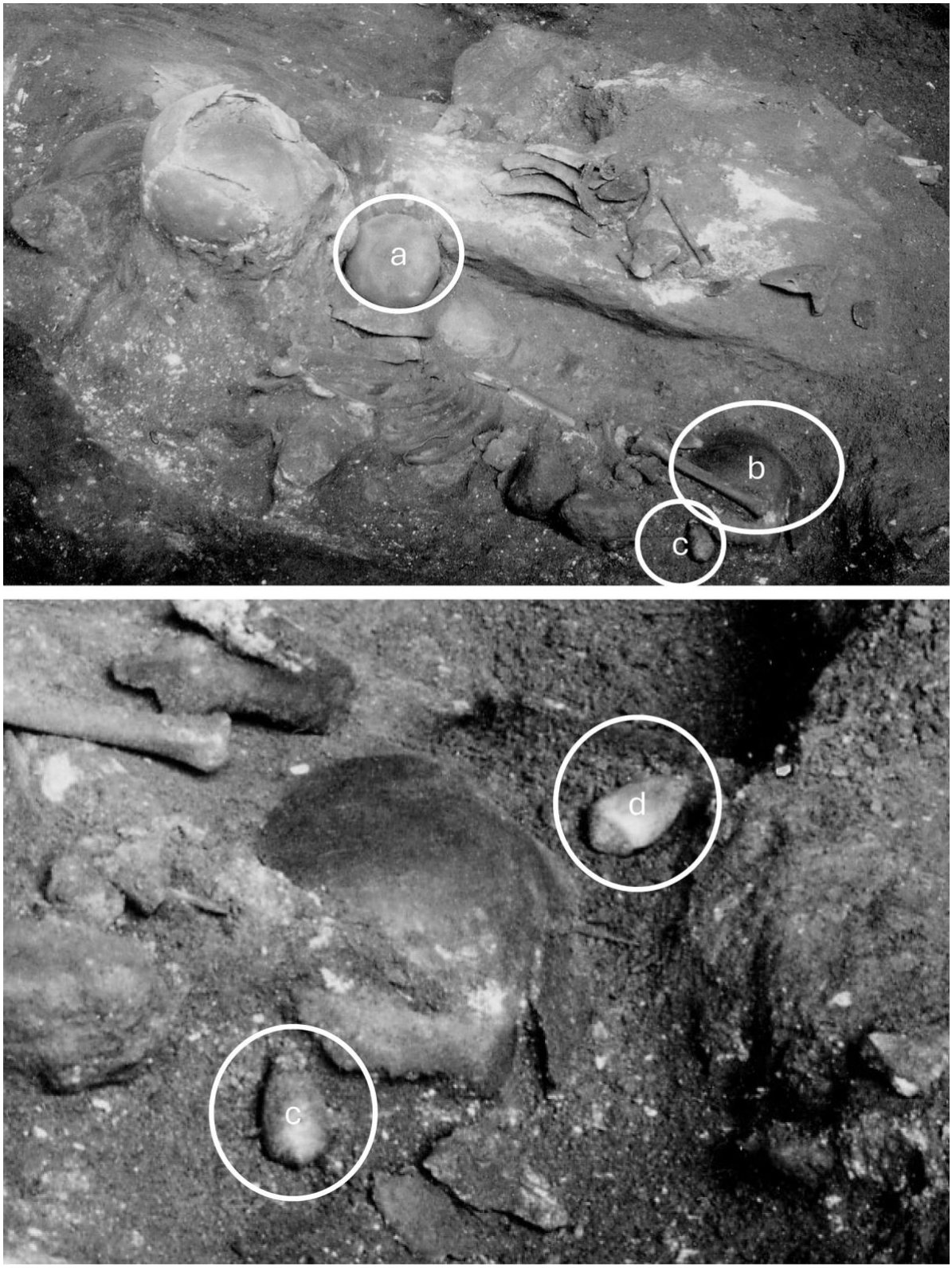

Figure 5. Top (not published before): Grave VIa as photographed by Goodwin with upper grindstone mentioned on the woman's chest (a), impression of the bored stone after removal (b), one of four *Conus* shells found next to the bored stone (c). Bottom (not published before): a second of the four *Conus* shells found next to the bored stone (d). Photographs used with permission of the University of Cape Town Library©.

Traceable grave goods associated with Grave VIa

In November 2023 the curators of the University of Cape Town Archaeology Department (Louisa Hutten) and !Khwa ttu Heritage Centre (Magdalena Lukas), helped to locate the Grave VIa bored stone

as the one currently on display in the First People's Museum at !Khwa ttu (on loan from the Archaeology Department). The stone is marked as that of Grave VIa at Oakhurst, and traces of a black residue are still present at one end of the perforation (Fig. 6). It is taller than wide, and perforated down its longer axis, exactly as Goodwin described. We may therefore accept that it is the plugged stone found with fish vertebrae at Oakhurst placed on the woman's right thigh. Modern damage to the rim of the perforation (Fig. 6, bottom), suggests that the black resinous substance and the fish vertebrae were removed somewhat forcefully sometime during the stone's curational history.



Figure 6. Bored stone found originally plugged at one end with a black resinous substance, and fish vertebrae in the hole (now removed), placed on the right of the woman buried in Grave VIa (photographs by Marlize Lombard ©).

During November 2024 I visited the IZIKO South African Museum in Cape Town to record material from Grave VIa now under their curation. Goodwin (1937b) mentioned four or five Wilton segments or crescents, and in a separate Grave VIa sample bag I found five backed microliths, two produced on crystal quartz, and one each on smoky quartz, milky quartz and chert (Fig. 7a). Other lithics mentioned by Goodwin, and curated as part of Grave VIa at IZIKO, include the large circularly worked crystal (Fig. 7b), and the two Mossel Bay type flakes (Fig. 7c).



Figure 7. Lithics mentioned in Goodwin's description of Grave VIa including five backed Wilton (a), the large circularly worked crystal (b), and the two Mossel Bay type flakes (c) (photographs Marlize Lombard ©). Scale in cm.

There are more sample bags with lithics marked as belonging to Grave VIa in the IZIKO collection. These include a large broken quartz crystal (Fig. 8a), a small broken hammer/grinding stone (Fig. 8b & c) – too small to be the upper grindstone on the woman's chest (Fig. 5a) – more crystal quartz microliths

(Fig. 8d), an assortment of milky quartz chips and chunks (Fig. 8e & f), some chips and chunks of other rock types (Fig. 8g), as well as another Middle Stone Age flake (Fig. 8h).

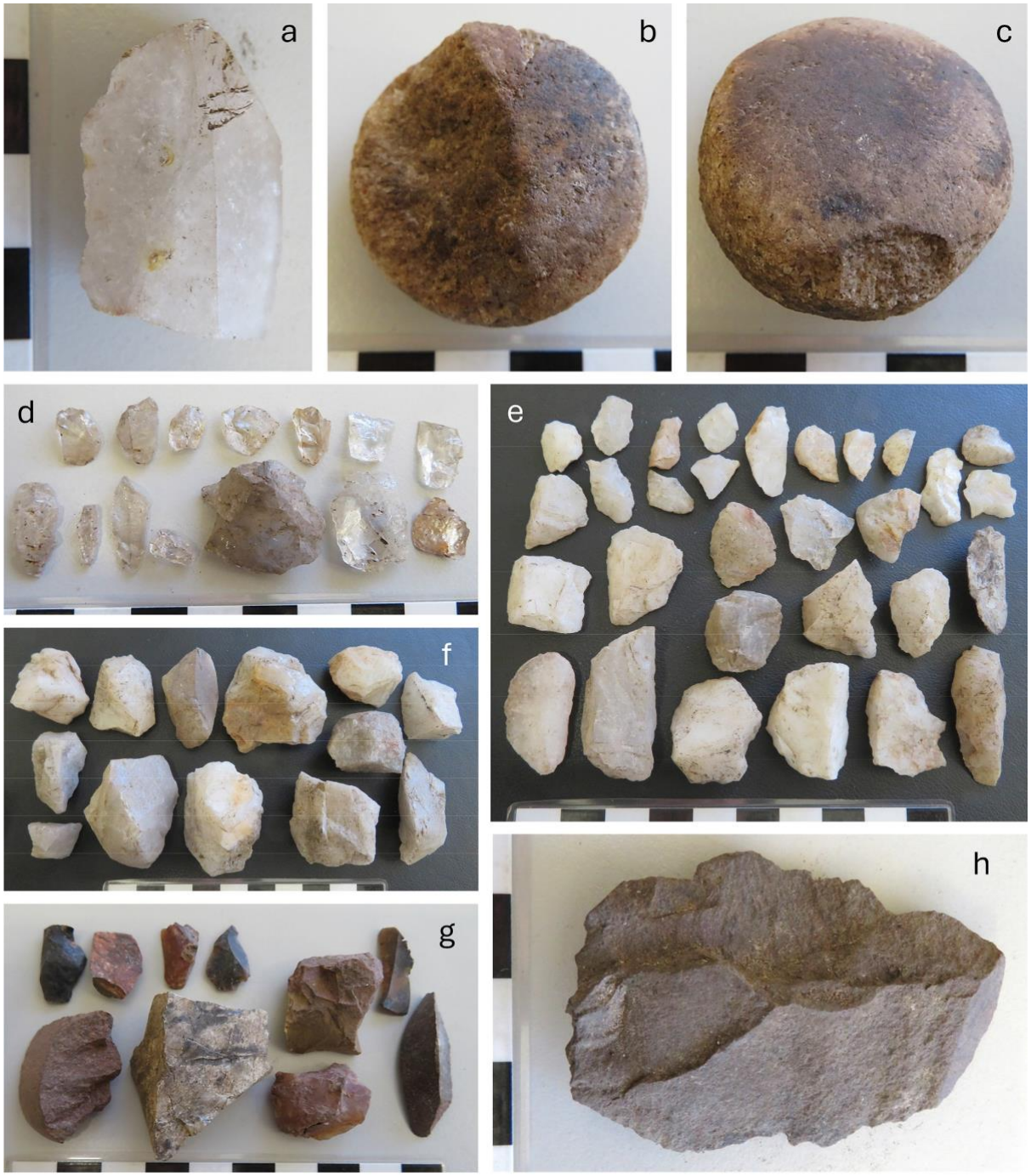

Figure 8. Lithics curated as associated with Grave VIa, but not included in Goodwin's (1937a) report, including a large broken quartz crystal (a), a small broken hammer/grinding stone (b & c), additional crystal-quartz microliths (d), an assortment of milky quartz chips and chunks (e & f), some chips and chunks of other types of stone (g), and another Middle Stone Age flake (h) (photographs Marlize Lombard ©). Scale in cm.

As described by Goodwin (1937b), there are several (I found four) white mussel (*Donax serra*) shells with traces of them having been filled with a liquid or semi-liquid pigment mixture containing red ochre and black pigments (Fig. 9a), and the pieces of black resinous material (Fig. 9b), one of which shows what Goodwin saw as the imprints of a flake and of a thin bone (Fig. 9c & d).

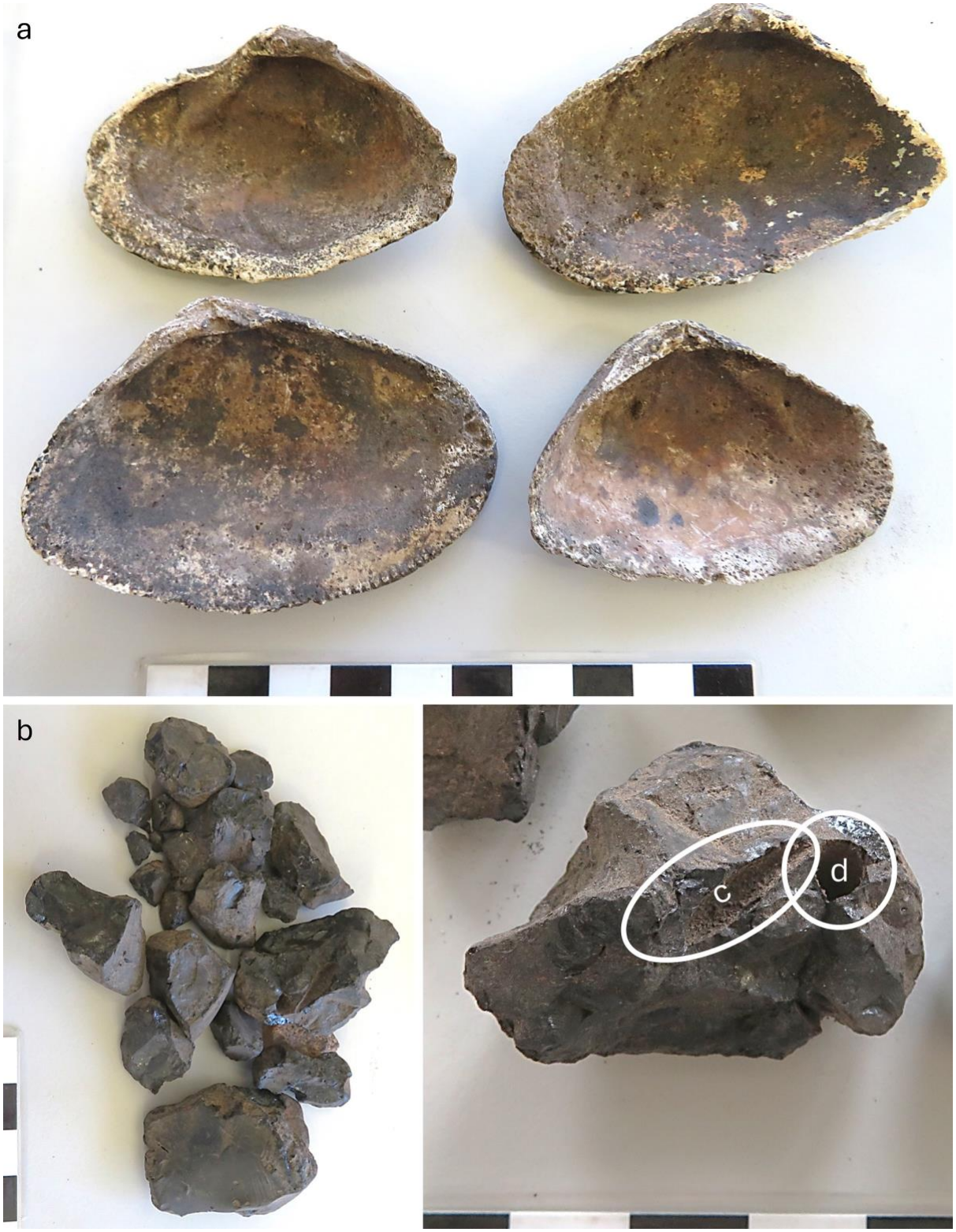

Figure 9. Non-lithic material reported by Goodwin to have been found in Grave VIa including four white mussel pigment containers (a), several pieces of black resinous material (b), and one with imprints of a flake (c) and of a thin bone (d) (photographs Marlize Lombard ©). Scale in cm.

VIa grave goods recorded by others or that may be material described by Goodwin

In 2005 David Pearce also tried to reconcile the material buried in Grave VIa as part of his doctoral research (Pearce 2008). At the time, he located several items distributed between IZIKO and a display case in the foyer of the University of Cape Town Archaeology Department. Apart from the bored stone

in Pearce's (2008) record, I could not confidently locate any of the artefacts he recorded. For example, he found some ostrich eggshell beads (Fig. 10a), of which it is not clear whether they comprised the bracelet that Goodwin preserved in wax (Fig. 4c). When I was at IZIKO all I found was an empty 'ostrich eggshell bead' sample bag for Grave VIa, so it seems that subsequent to Pearce's record the beads were removed for research or display purposes with no note of its whereabouts left in the bag.



Figure 10. Artefacts recorded by David Pearce as belonging to Grave VIa, including: ostrich eggshell beads (a), slate palettes (b-d), bone points (e), and shell discs (f) (photographs David Pearce ©, used with his permission).

Pearce photographed the broken half of a palette (Fig. 10b), which Goodwin found with a large ochre-painted stone, three river pebbles and the circularly worked quartz crystal behind the woman's pelvis, and recorded the two complete palettes that were buried near her (Fig. 10c & d), as well as the two bone 'arrow' points illustrated by Goodwin (1937b; Fig 10e), currently on display at !Khwa ttu (Louisa Hutten pers. comm. June 2025). Pearce also found five shell discs indicated as belonging to Grave VIa (Fig. 10f), not included in Goodwin's description of the grave.

Three more artefacts from the Oakhurst assemblage may be part of the VIa grave goods as described by Goodwin, but are not unambiguously provenanced as such. First, Carmel Schrire refitted an ostrich eggshell water container labelled 'Graves VI & VIa Oakhurst, George' (Fig. 11a-c), currently curated at the University of Cape Town Archaeology Department (Louisa Hutten pers. comm. June 2025). At IZIKO I found sample bags with ostrich eggshell fragments marked 'Grave VI', but not for Grave VIa. It is therefore possible that this is the crushed ostrich eggshell, bored at one end, that Goodwin found behind the pelvis of the woman buried in Grave VIa. A rubbing stone marked with 'O. 6a', in the same way as other artefacts from Grave VIa, is also currently on display at !Khwa ttu (Louisa Hutten pers. comm. June 2025) (Fig 11d). Lastly, the IZIKO Oakhurst assemblage contains a large, ochre-stained upper grindstone marked as 'D.O.G. 6990' (Fig. 11e). Based on its size, shape, and staining it could be the stone found on the chest of the woman buried in Grave VIa (Fig. 5a).

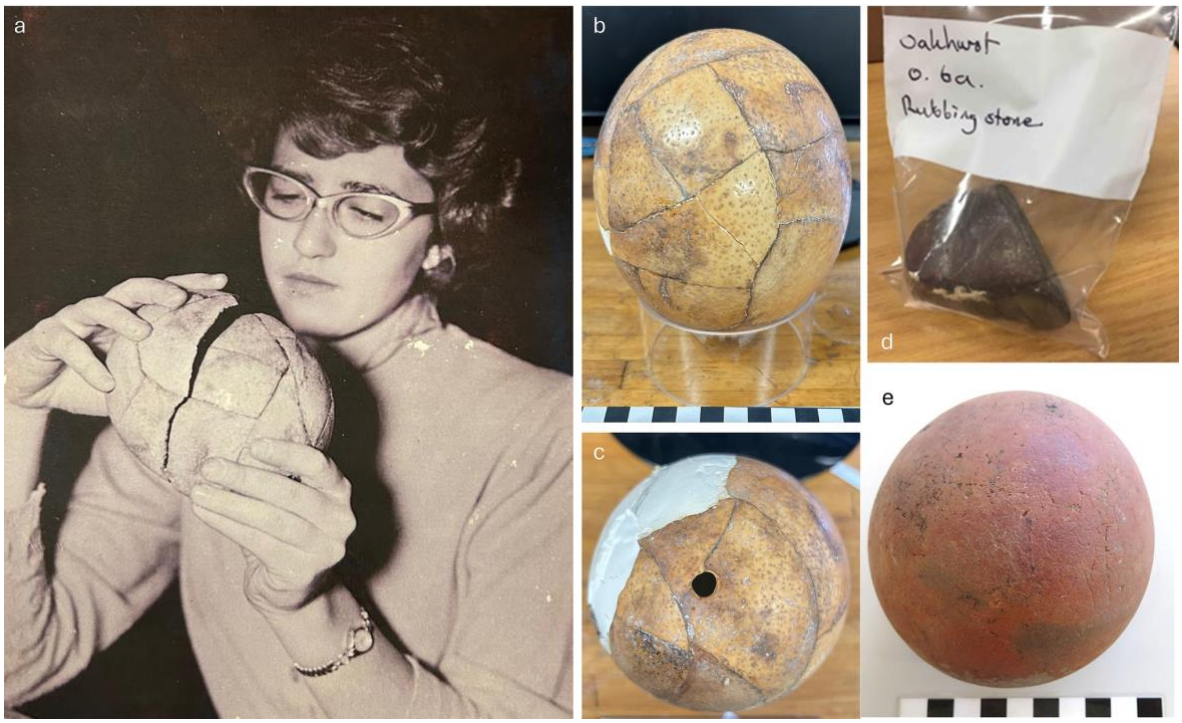

Figure 11. Possible goods belonging to Grave VIa including a refitted ostrich eggshell water bottle (a-c), a small rubbing stone (d) (photographs Louisa Hutten ©, used with her permission), and an ochre-stained upper grindstone (e) (photograph Marlize Lombard ©).

Currently untraceable items described by Goodwin for Grave VIa

After three years of investigating all possible avenues, and contacting all possible repositories and curators (only the University of Cape Town Department of Human Biology declined to communicate whether they were curating any relevant grave goods), I was unable to locate the following items listed by Goodwin (1937b) as part of Grave VIa:

- The gravestones, three with red ochre traces, but no paint. It is unclear whether any of the gravestones from Oakhurst were brought from the site or left there.
- The unbroken series of fish vertebrae found in the bored stone. At IZIKO I found a sample bag marked 'bone' from Grave VIa, and whilst it contained a human tooth and four distal human phalanges, amongst a few animal bones, there were no fish remains.
- The four pierced *Conus* shells and three pieces of ironstone that Goodwin (1937b) interpreted as forming part of a waist girdle. During my visit to IZIKO in November 2023 there were several pierced *Conus* shells on display, which the curator thought could come from Oakhurst. Before my visit in November 2024 the display was dismantled, and the location of the shells was uncertain. An unmarked piece of ironstone from Oakhurst is currently at the University of Cape Town Archaeology Department (Louisa Hutten pers. comm. June 2025).
- The right wrist with a ~4 cm wide bracelet consisting of an intricate band of ostrich eggshell beads, photographed and fixed in wax for future development by Goodwin (1937a, b). The only

photograph is of poor quality (Fig. 4c), and it is unclear whether these may be the beads recorded by Pearce in 2005 (Fig. 10a).
- The large stone with red paint found behind the woman's pelvis.
- The three river pebbles ~7 cm in diameter with red ochre on them.
- Remains of the seagrass grave lining, which Goodwin may not have brought from the site.
- The 'water-tortoise' remains mentioned by Goodwin in the context of Grave VIe, but which he thought probably belonged to Grave VIa.

5. Discussion

Previous interpretations of the Oakhurst VIa grave goods

Wadley (1997), though unable to locate any of the grave goods, was the first to revisit Grave VIa. She used Goodwin's fieldnotes and Drennan's (1937a) male identification to critique the notion that the gender of deceased people is generally reflected in the associated burial practices. In her analysis, the fact that 'women's artefacts' such as grindstones and bored stones are also found in men's graves suggested that the materiality and gender association of the artefacts became less important in their symbolic context as grave goods. She further argued that burial practices do not always reflect "the lifetime role and status of the deceased, instead grave goods could be about their roles after death" (Wadley 1997: 109). Based on ethnographic accounts of San women beating the ground with bored stones and/or round grindstones to call out to the dead (Bleek 1935), Wadley (1997) hypothesised that the inclusion of grindstones and bored stones in Later Stone Age graves may be a forerunner to the subsequent San practice of using such artefacts to communicate with the dead. She cautions, however, that although continuities in beliefs about the spirit world may be represented through some grave goods, their mere presence in the Stone Age does not automatically vouch for symbolic continuity; such hypotheses are best used only if they represent a best-fit explanation for the data (Wadley 1987).

Wadley (1997) interpreted the fish placed within the hole of the bored stone as metaphor for an altered state of consciousness and the ability to travel underwater during a trance experience. Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004) highlighted that whilst bored stones occur relatively frequently in graves (see Table 2, adapted from Lombard 2024), the fish vertebrae sealed inside the stone make it unusual. They further suggested that bored stones may have been placed in Stone Age graves to facilitate contact with the dead, invoking ethnographic accounts of San women beating such stones to communicate with the spirit world (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 62). Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004) concurred with Wadley's (1997) suggestion that the bored-stone-fish combination may be a trance metaphor for underwater travel, and also agreed that the concept of passing through holes or swimming through passageways to reach the spirit world may be implied (Lombard 2002).

Pearce (2008) subsequently suggested that even if not related to underwater travel, the fish vertebrae in the stone can be positively linked to the 'underwater theme' identified in several other Later Stone Age burials from the southern Cape, highlighting that (Pearce 2008: 212):

> In Later Stone Age rock art, fish and other aquatic creatures were often associated with religious specialists and underwater travel (e.g., Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1999; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a, b). The fish vertebrae may therefore be a representation of the common ethnographic underwater metaphor. Why the vertebrae were placed inside the perforation of the bored stone, however, remains unclear. I suggest, though, that the notion of passing through a hole may be significant (see Lombard 2002 on concepts related to passage through the holes of bored stones), and may well relate to the symbolism inherent in grave holes themselves.

The three river pebbles and seashells, found with the woman in Grave VIa, may also be linked with symbolism relating to the underwater spirit world (Pearce 2008).

Pearce (2008) suggested that the Middle Stone Age flakes in the woman's grave may reflect Wadley's (1987) interpretation of such tools as objects 'of great antiquity', found alongside other unusual items – including quartz crystals, uncommon stones (including bored stones), and divining die – as part of a

shaman's or sorcerer's cache. Quartz is widely associated with hunter-gatherer views of the spirit world (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004), which Wadley (1997) suggested may be a reason for its inclusion in some Later Stone Age burials. Pearce (2008: 206) further suggests that the sea grass lining of Grave VIa and other Wilton graves at Oakhurst may reflect "ideas of the sea and transitions between underwater and land", as well as "metaphorical concepts of sleep". The latter interpretation was prompted by Goodwin's (1937a: 237) observation of "compressed and wadded bundles of sea-grass" between the fireplaces of the uppermost layer at Oakhurst Shelter and the rear wall, which were used as bedding "both for the living and the dead".

Some additional thoughts about Grave VIa

Whilst this report does not aim to offer a comprehensive new interpretation of the full assemblage of grave goods and their possible meaning/s – a task reserved for a future, theoretically informed study – I present a few additional thoughts on some themes represented in the burial. The first theme relates to the plugged bored stone within which a series of fish vertebrae had been inserted. Bored stones are ubiquitous in South Africa and are found across sub-Saharan Africa (Lombard 2024), with the oldest examples coming from Border Cave in South Africa dating to ~45-41 ka (Beaumont 1978; d'Errico et al. 2012). Their ritual use in the form of grave goods is documented in 26 burials across South Africa that date to between ~7500 BP and 300 BP (Table 3; for discussion see Lombard 2024). The oldest evidence of such use comes from the mid-Holocene context at Matjes River, ~70 km west of Oakhurst Shelter, where the timing of the practice may have overlapped with that of Oakhurst Grave VIa (Table 3).

Bored stones such as the one from Grave VIa, which are taller than they are wide, are rare. Out of the 1429 stones from across South Africa for which I have measurements (all those reported by Goodwin [1947] plus >50 stones personally measured at McGregor Museum in April 2023), only nine (0.6%) from different regions in South Africa show this morphology, and the one from Oakhurst is the only one known to be associated with a grave. The sporadic manufacturing or use of such stones therefore does not seem to be linked to either regional traditions or their use as grave goods.

The Grave VIa bored stone could have functioned as a weight for a digging stick when the woman was still alive. Such gendered, mundane use is the fall-back interpretation (Goodwin 1947), regardless of shape, size, context or age (but see Ouzman 1997 for other uses). Green (2020: 3), for example states that: "Sticks depicted with bored stones are only painted with figures with breasts and indeterminate figures with large buttocks", and Parkington and Paterson (2021) reiterate that throughout the Western Cape, naked males are never painted with weighted digging sticks. However, in a spirit-world context recorded by Stow (1905; Stow & Bleek 1930), near Witsieshoek in the Free State, therianthropes with penises are depicted with bored stones on sticks (see Hollmann & Lombard 2024 for discussion). Also, in KwaZulu-Natal at Bushpig Shelter men are depicted wielding objects interpreted as bored stones (Ouzman 1997), and Ouzman (1997) found less excavation-centric, empirical and contextual support for the digging-stick-weight hypothesis than for the spiritual-symbolic use of bored stones.

Knowledge about the beating of stones to communicate with the spirit world came from the /Xam records (University of Cape Town's The Digital Bleek and Lloyd n.d.), which contain three references to women using bored stones for communication with spirit people who used to be game sorcerers, and Rains' things in the form of a chameleon (see discussion in Lombard 2024). Bleek and Lloyd (1911: 429) wrote that they were told that "a man does not beat a stone upon the ground – a woman beats a stone upon the ground". Subsequently, data collected by Hoff (2017) in the Nama Karoo from informants of /Xam descent reveal that they believe in an underworld wherein graves and the act of grave digging or digging for water, certain foods and medicinal roots or bulbs (with weighted or unweighted digging sticks), were connected to the spirit world, and that bored stones had a particular link with that world. Similar to the /Xam who shared information with Bleek and Lloyd more than a century ago, Hoff's informants indicated that spirits could be called by hitting the ground with a round stone (bored or unbored), and that bored stones may have been placed in graves to end the death connection (Hoff 1990, 2017). Hollman (2022) sees the beating of stones as representing a worldview wherein ancestral sorcerers of both sexes can be approached by the living for help.

Table 3. Known South African grave-good contexts for bored stones, with sites arranged chronologically from oldest to youngest (including those not dated) (adapted from Lombard 2024).

Site, province, population	Age	Notes	Sources
Matjes River Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	7540-5230 BP mean based on associated Wilton skeletons	Burial three feet down in Wilton layer, found with bored stone, tortoise shell, and 131 other objects	Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Matjes River Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	7540-5230 BP mean based on associated Wilton skeletons	Burial four feet down in Wilton layer, found with incomplete bored stone, and 75 other objects	Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Matjes River Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	7540-5230 BP mean based on associated Wilton skeletons	Burial 4.6 feet down in Wilton layer, found with complete bored stone and a tortoise shell under its head	Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Oakhurst Shelter Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	5240-4510 BP Grave VIa	Grave X covered with several gravestones, behind the skull or resting on it were an ostrich eggshell and a spherical bored stone, another eggshell or parts of it rested on the face	Goodwin 1937b; Loftus et al. 2024
Oakhurst Shelter Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	4810 BP mean	Grave VIa, found with gravestones, red ochre, Wilton artefacts, bored stone, ostrich eggshell flask, jewellery of ostrich eggshell and conus shells	Goodwin 1937b; Loftus et al. 2024
Bokbaai, Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	3550 BP mean	Skeletal material found close to a perfect spherical bored stone, a flat bored stone of irregular shape and a grooved bead-polisher of coarse sandstone	Rudner & Rudner 1955; Loftus et al. 2024
Tsitsikamma Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	3290-1680 BP mean based on associated skeletons	Bored stone found with female skeleton	FitzSimons 1926; Wadley 1997; Loftus et al. 2024
Knysna Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	2350 BP mean	One of 12 burials with stone slabs over the bodies, this person was buried with stone tools and 'ring stones' (spherical, slightly flattened on the sides, or quoit-like, and others with cutting edges, in every stage of manufacture)	FitzSimons 1928; Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Knysna Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	1960 BP mean	One of 12 burials with stone slabs over the bodies, this person was buried with stone tools and stone rings as described above	FitzSimons 1928; Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Cape St Francis Eastern Cape Hunter-gatherer	1810 BP mean	Cranium found in sand dunes, with bored stone and other stone implements	Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Bokbaai Western Cape Pastoralist	1800 BP mean	A jawbone found with a bored stone disc	Rudner & Rudner 1955; Loftus et al. 2024
Happy Rest Limpopo Agriculturalist	1310 BP mean	Grave goods, including a bored stone with male skeleton	Steyn & Nienaber 2000; Loftus et al. 2024
Cape Agulhas, Western Cape Pastoralist?	960 BP mean	Isolated human remains on beach, possibly associated with pottery and bored stones	Wells 1951; Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
K2 Limpopo Agriculturalist	760- 970 BP (indirect)	Grave goods, including a bored stone with child's skeleton	Steyn & Nienaber 2000; Loftus et al. 2024
Waterbakke Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	650 BP mean	Isolated grave just above high-water mark found with a bored stone	Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Cape St Francis Eastern Cape Hunter-gatherer	410 BP mean	Cranium and mandible found in sand dunes, with a bored stone and other stone implements	Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Koffiefontein Free State Pastoralist	400 BP mean	Shallow round grave with stones in the shaft, body buried with ostrich eggshell beads, a bored stone, and a small pot	Humphreys 1970; Morris 1992; Loftus et al. 2024
Grootdrink Northern Cape Pastoralist	~300 BP (indirect)	Old graves at a depth of between 3.5 and 5.5 m, with them were found several ostrich eggshell flasks (one filled with powdered specularite iron), egg-shell beads, bored stones (one of them heart-shaped), pots and other objects	Rudner 1971; Maggs 1977
Cape Flats Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	Not dated	Skeletal fragments with broken half of a bored stone, grooved stones and other stone implements	Goodwin 1929
Heads Road Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	Not dated	Bored stone found with skeletons	Goodwin 1947
Pearly Beach Western Cape Hunter-gatherer	Not dated	Cranial fragments and two mandibles found with grinding stones, bored stones and stone flakes	Morris 1992
Rietrivier Free State Hunter-gatherer	Not dated	Stone ring/disc, found with skeleton	Esterhuyse 1964

Site, province, population	Age	Notes	Sources
Essexvale Eastern Cape Pastoralist	Not dated	Human remains found with partly bored stone and pottery sherd	Morris 1992
Koffiefontein Free State Pastoralist	Not dated	Shallow round grave with stones in the shaft, body buried with a bored stone, cowrie shells, and a lugged pot	Broom 1941; Humphreys 1970; Morris 1992
Strydpoort Free State Pastoralist	Not dated	Burial in stone circles with bored stone, cowrie shell, and ostrich eggshell beads	Morris 1992
Magoebaskloof Limpopo Agriculturalist	Not dated	Pot burial with bored stone	Morris 1992

As suggested above, the fish in the stone's perforation may represent the concept of passing through holes or swimming through passageways when travelling to and from the spirit world (Lombard 2002, 2024). Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004) see fish as underwater metaphors or spirit-world creatures encountered by shamans when they experience altered states of consciousness as being immersed in water. Similar to the chameleon, fish are counted amongst Rain's things (Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Bleek 1933), as well as snakes, turtles, tadpoles and frogs. Fish are, however, the only exclusively aquatic beings of Rain that never leave the water, or they die if they do. As such, they signify a full, and perhaps irreversible, immersion into the place that spirits enter when people die (Guenther 2020). One possibility is therefore that a fish or a series of fish vertebrae in a terrestrial context, such as the bored stone buried with the woman in Oakhurst Grave VIa, may represent a link to Rain's things and/or that once deceased, she was seen by those who buried her as permanently immersed into the spirit world – the resinous cap at one end of the hole metaphorically obstructing her ability to come back to life. Regardless of the range of possibilities or constraints, the fish in the bored stone capped at one end, buried with the woman at Oakhurst is an indisputable example of a bored stone used in a ritualised, symbolic context 5000 years ago. The recent accounts of bored stones, used by some San individuals as a link with the spirit world (Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Hoff 2017), demonstrate a measure of continuity in the spiritual and/or ritualised use of bored stones stretching over several millennia – in tandem with southern African genetic continuity throughout the Holocene (e.g., D'Amato et al. 2025; Gretzinger et al. 2024; Jakobsson et al. 2026).

The second theme concerns the crystal quartz and quartz lithics. Goodwin (1937b) mentioned the large quartz crystal shaped into a 'round scraper' found in Grave VIa, and I found another piece of unworked quartz crystal with the quartz lithics associated with the grave. A large broken crystal was also found lodged in the left eye socket of a four-year-old child buried in Grave IX at Oakhurst (Goodwin 1937b; Drennan 1937b), dated to 4995±215 bp (PAA-2117) (Patrick 1989). According to Goodwin (1937b) the child was lying on its side and behind its back was a second child (Grave IXa) with its arm across the shoulder of the first. He further observed that although the crystal's presence may be coincidental, it's eye-sized 'diamond facet' was placed to accurately represent an eye (Fig. 12), and that no other crystals were found in the grave (Goodwin 1937b). Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004) suggested that even if the placing was accidental, the crystal must have been brought into the cave deliberately, and that if its positioning in/on the child's eye was intentional it may be linked to a "spiritual way of seeing" (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 65). A possible interpretation of the quartz lithics and small hammerstone is that the woman from Grave VIa was the one shaping such stones for either mundane or spiritual 'seeing' purposes.

Lastly, I want to underscore the use of ochre and pigment-making paraphernalia in Grave VIa. Similar to other mid-Holocene burials, for example those at Klasies River Mouth Cave 5 and Welgeluk Shelter (Hall & Binneman 1987), ochre was an important aspect of the burial of the woman in Grave VIa. First, Goodwin (1937b) recorded that three of the gravestones covering the grave were ochre stained, but not painted. At Welgeluk a burial cairn also contained three stone slabs with red-ochre stains on their upper surfaces. Hall and Binneman (1987: 144) pointed out that: "While this ochre may have been deliberately applied it may also have resulted from contact with ochre nodules from the overlying deposits". FitzSimons (1926: 814-815), however, reported that most burials at Witcher's Cave were found with

large, flat stones "smeared with red ochre" and that a few showed traces of crude paintings. At Tierkloof the larger one of two painted stones, capping a human grave, was painted with representational imagery (Pearce 2005). Ochre-stained or painted stones may thus form deliberate gravestones, even though this may not have been their exclusive purpose (Pearce 2005).



Figure 12. Children buried in Oakhurst Graves IX and IXa, one of whom were found with a large broken crystal in their left eye socket (adapted from Goodwin 1937b: plate VIA) (photograph used with permission of the University of Cape Town Library©).

Less ambiguous is the fact that the bored stone on the woman's right thigh was surrounded by red ochre in the earth, and that red ochre powder was strewn between it and the upper grindstone on her chest (Fig. 5a). Her torso was therefore covered in red ochre powder, linking the two large spherical stones placed on her body. Of specific interest is the large stone with red paint behind her pelvis, found covering a mass of powdered ochre soil (Goodwin 1937b). This is similar to the burial of a young woman at Klasies River Mouth Cave 5, perhaps 16-18 years old, also found with a thick layer of red ochre below her pelvis as well as red ochre-stained ostrich eggshell beads around her pelvis, probably attached to two alikreukel (*Turbo sarmaticus*) pendants worn around the hips (Hall & Binneman 1987). In more recent times, San women from southern Africa often use/d red ochre body paint for puberty initiation rites associated with a girl's first menses, and upon her wedding, signalling ovulation and fertility (e.g., Marshall 1959, 1999; Shostak 1981; Watts 2002). Although we may never know exactly how the large stone with red paint and powdered ochre behind the pelvis of the woman in Grave VIa relates to the ethno-historical accounts, Watts (2024) argues that the metaphoric relationship between women's reproduction and ochre could date back to the Middle Stone Age.

Within the powdered-ochre soil behind her pelvis, Goodwin (1937b) recorded a cache of additional grave goods including not only the large circularly worked crystal, two Mossel Bay-type flakes, and a crushed ostrich eggshell water bottle, but also pigment-making paraphernalia. The latter is represented

by the four white mussel shells with residues demonstrating that they were once filled with liquid pigment containing red ochre and black pigments, half a broken palette, and three ochre-stained river pebbles that could have been used as small grinding stones. A similar pigment-making set consisting of an abalone (*Haliotis midae*) shell, once filled with a liquefied ochre-rich mixture, an ochre-stained grindstone and a seal scapula palette was found at Blombos Cave dating to ~100 ka (Henshilwood et al. 2011), testifying to the antiquity of such paraphernalia. Solomon (2000) highlights ethno-historical records suggesting that from the mining of pigments to women grinding pigments during full moon, the process of painting had 'magical' significance linked to the world of sorcerers (mythological 'First Bushmen', 'First People' or spirits of dead San).

In addition to the shell pigment containers, grindstones and palettes buried with the woman in Oakhurst Grave VIa, there was also a hollow bone point with black residues on its tip (Fig. 10e) similar to hollow bone tips used as tattooing needles elsewhere (Deter-Wolf et al. 2021). Whereas black residues on bone points from South Africa may represent poison (e.g., Bradfield et al. 2020), I am not aware of diagonally cut hollow points being used as arrow tips, and Bradfield (2010) mostly interpreted them as awls. In the case of the hollow point from Grave VIa, future residue analysis may shed light on the use of the artefact. In San communities, tattooing was/is widely practiced in association with initiation, marriage and hunting rituals (see Mitchell & Plug 1997 for an overview). Special black medicine made from a burnt and powdered medicinal root is, for example, applied to incisions in the skin of a hunter so that "the arrow may fly straight at the springbok" (Hollmann 2004: 301), or is applied by a woman healer to cuts in a newly pair-bonded man and woman to "strengthen the uniting influence of the mixed bloods and [to] also help…ensure the couple's prosperity and happiness [or to] ward off want and disaster" (Silberbauer 1963: 20). I am unaware of other pigment-making tool sets, or potential pigment application tools, in the Stone Age record so directly associated with a single person – woman or man – as with the woman in Oakhurst Grave VIa. These artefacts suggest that some of her activities may have included the preparation of pigments during her lifetime, perhaps for the painting of stones or the colouring of other items such as beads, but potentially also for body decoration, menarcheal rites or other symbolic/ritual performances. In the case of the hollow point from Grave VIa, future residue analysis may shed light on the use of the artefact as a potential tattoo instrument.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to draw together all published bioarchaeological knowledge about the person buried in Oakhurst Grave VIa (Table 2), and for the first time to visually present as much of the grave goods as possible. Although Goodwin's controlled excavation procedures and recording methods were exemplary for its time, post-excavation control, and curatorial practices throughout the last century – namely, the splitting up of the grave goods, inter-institutional loans, and not keeping track of artefacts used for research or display purposes – have compromised the full presentation of the grave goods. It seems that Schrire removed some of the cultural material from the assemblage to display in the University of Cape Town Archaeology Department (Judith Sealy pers. comm. June 2025), and that the rest of the assemblage was ultimately transferred to the IZIKO South African Museum in Cape Town. Some artefacts associated with unknown Oakhurst burials may, however, also be curated with skeletal material at the University of Cape Town Department of Human Biology (Victoria Gibbon pers. comm. September 2024). The curator, however, declined to communicate whether any of the Grave VIa burial goods were present, so that I could not write an informed application to record material from that repository.

Wadley (1997: 126) saw Oakhurst Grave VIa as unusual or even "bizarre to the Western eye", because of the fish bones inserted into the bored stone and the presence of the Middle Stone Age flakes. Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004: 62) saw the bored stone with fish vertebrae as "the most complex of all grave goods". Pearce (2008) suggested a clear connection between Oakhurst Grave VIa and the underwater spirit world, evoking the possibility of a shaman's or sorcerer's cache, and above I suggest links to pigment production, womanhood and fertility ritual. These hypotheses remain speculative, wherein archaeology, ethnography and rock art each capture only already biased fragments of the possible human experience (e.g., McGranaghan 2017). None the less, we may learn more about the woman buried ~5000 years ago at Oakhurst Shelter and the worldview of those who buried her by

revisiting the complete set of grave goods in greater detail and from well-considered theoretical angles.

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