

Archaeological significance: Ntshekane

The Muden area contains archaeological sites dating from the Early Stone Age, probably older than one million years, through to the 1950s. In archaeological circles, Early Iron Age sites dating to between AD 600 and 1100 are perhaps the best-known part of this heritage.

Of the Early Iron Age sites, Ntshekane on the farm Nietgedocht 1192 has the greatest significance from the point of view of a history of archaeological research. Tim Maggs excavated Ntshekane in 1973 and published a full report in 1976 (Maggs & Michael 1976). He announced key initial results from the excavation in a collection of notes in the *South African Journal of Science* (Mason et al. 1973) that presented evidence from several first millennium AD sites for the longevity of settlement by African farmers in southern Africa. Tim Maggs's work at Ntshekane and other Early Iron Age sites in the 1970s resulted in a complete revision of our understanding of the chronology of Iron Age settlement in (then) Natal. His revision still stands today.

From the point of view of archaeological research, Ntshekane remains a site of significance. The extensive erosion that exposed archaeological material to Tim Maggs in the 1970s continues to reveal new features worthy of research. Since the 1970s, much research has been done on the Early Iron Age period, especially in KwaZulu-Natal (e.g. Maggs 1994–95; Van Schalkwyk 1994–95; Whitelaw 1994–95; Fowler & Greenfield 2009). The kinds of questions we ask now of the archaeological record are different from those of the 1970s, when the focus was primarily on settlement and sequence. Now we can address socio-cultural issues such as the details of Early Iron Age marriage alliances, and contact and interaction between culturally distinct farming communities in the eleventh century AD (e.g. Whitelaw 2013; Huffman & Whitelaw n.d.; Whitelaw n.d.). Indeed, our work at Ntshekane has identified features containing assemblages with both Ntshekane and Blackburn ceramics – a genuinely exciting archaeological phenomenon. Our work at Ntshekane has also added significantly to the data supporting long-distance exchange and trade during the Early Iron Age (e.g. Maggs & Whitelaw 1991: 15, 17; Whitelaw 1994–95: 46–7; Coutu et al. 2016) with the recovery of 47 glass and one copper bead. Previously, Early Iron Age glass beads from KwaZulu-Natal numbered only three.

References

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