

### **Motivation for proposed work: Ntshekane**

Our motivation is two-fold. First, Ntshekane is severely damaged by rapid ongoing erosion, which was possibly initiated by vegetation clearance and topsoil damage during Early Iron Age times (e.g. see Marker & Evers 1976 for another example). One of the project's aims is to rescue eroding archaeological material.

Secondly, the erosion provides a research opportunity as it allows us to recover material and record features with relatively little work. Our aim here is to apply what we know of Early Iron Age settlement layout to Ntshekane, that is, to apply the Central Cattle Pattern model to the site in an effort to bring order to its fragmented, damaged archaeological remains (Huffman & Whitelaw n.d.). The approach enhances the value of individual features by placing them in a meaningful relationship with other features. On the one hand the project serves as a test, or a demonstration, of the potential of the Central Cattle Pattern model. On the other, we can discover more about the details of Early Iron Age settlements through a recursive relationship between data and model, and so refine our understanding of the period.

Our interpretation suggests that Ntshekane supported a sequence of homesteads, represented by cattle pens about 25 m in diameter, between AD 600 and 1100. From the oldest remains (Msuluzi phase, AD 650–790), we can identify a single cattle pen plus scatters of surrounding material. The next phase (Ndondondwane, AD 790–950) contains four cattle pens. Two are close together and possibly indicate the development of a larger, more complex homestead of a senior man. The final Ntshekane phase (AD 950–1050) includes up to ten cattle pens, six or seven of which occur in the same part of the site as the earlier paired Ndondondwane pens. They suggest the growth of an increasingly complex homestead, with the cattle pens each related to a distinct section or household. If correct, this interpretation means that Ntshekane resembles KwaGandaganda in the uMngeni Valley, and is also possibly a chief's capital (Whitelaw 1994; Huffman & Whitelaw n.d.). Additional support comes from the small bead assemblage (n = 183 beads), which includes 47 imported glass beads and one copper bead. Such items derived from long-distance exchanges were likely more common on capitals than ordinary homesteads (Evers & Hammond-Tooke 1986; Maggs & Whitelaw 1991: 15, 17; Whitelaw 1994–95; Huffman & Whitelaw n.d.).

The interpretation thus far serves as a hypothesis on which to base future work that aims to improve our knowledge of various Early Iron Age features (e.g. the different uses of pits, erosion-exposed burials). The site also potentially offers un-eroded deposits that may be fruitfully investigated.

Further, we have identified pit features that contain pottery of two distinctively different styles – Ntshekane and Blackburn. This site is the first in the interior of KwaZulu-Natal to yield Blackburn material, and it is the first to provide evidence of contact and interaction between Ntshekane and Blackburn communities. We suspect intermarriage. This particular interaction is poorly understood, yet it resulted in the most abrupt change in the archaeological record of KwaZulu-Natal of the last 2000 years. Ntshekane can perhaps provide the required data.

## References

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