

Motivation for the excavation of Platberg Mission Station in the eastern Free State.

Mission stations research appears to be the ugly duckling of historical archaeological research thus far, although historical research into mission stations do exist. The station to be investigated, Platberg on the Caledon, a nineteenth century Wesleyan Missionary Society station, is situated 5km from present day Ladybrand and 10km from the Caledon River in the eastern Free State. The proposed research will investigate the social, political and economic relations of the inhabitants of the mission over the approximately 34 years that it functioned as a mission village. The Caledon River Valley and surrounding area was by 1840, home to a number of Wesleyan and Paris Evangelical Mission Stations. Their presence, influence and differences in approach affected the social, economic and political life of the communities in which they worked. As far as I am aware this is the only mission station in the Caledon River Valley under historical and archaeological investigation.

The focus of my research falls on Captain Carolus Baatjes and the Bastards of Platberg, who move wraithlike in and out of missionary and historical records. The Platberg Bastards first appear in the written records of missionary accounts in Transorangia as a group under the leadership of a man called Carolus Baatje or Karolus Baaitjes, where they were referred to as the "Bastards of Carolus Baatje" (Ambrose:2009:5). As the Bastards situation in the colony deteriorated in the early nineteenth century, new arrivals of Bastard groups in Transorangia became a regular occurrence in the 1820s and 1830s (Legassick:2010:162,173). They usually arrived well equipped with horses, guns and ammunition and the more prosperous had wagons an essential possession in carrying out the business of trade.

Carolus Baatjes' name is first mentioned in the Wesleyan missionary accounts of 1833 when he formed part of the group of Rolong, Griqua, Korana and missionaries from the Boetsap and Platberg on the Vaal mission stations, who set off on an expedition to find a new, well watered and safe area in which to settle. Later in 1833 roughly 12000 people, moved from Platberg on the Vaal and Boetsap to the Caledon River Valley area (Schoeman:1991:25) and were settled between four Wesleyan Mission station, Thaba Nchu, Platberg, Lishuane and Umpukane. Carolus Baatjes and the Bastards settled at Platberg on the Caledon or Platberg 2, a site which was chosen because it boasted two strong springs. Platberg was the second most important Wesleyan Mission station in what the Missionaries referred to as the Bechuana District, after Thaba Nchu, the town settled by the Seleka and Tshidi Rolong as well as a group of Khoe-speaking men with Dutch surnames (Landau:2010:114).

Although Lange, Schmidt & Gebel of the Berlin Missionary Society disparagingly commented in 1835, "concerning this completely Dutch station there is nothing much to be said. Its people are Griquas who formerly lived at Old Bootschap..." (K.Schoeman:2003:86) the Wesleyan missionary Rev Shaw who visited the station in 1848 praises the mission

settlement, orchards and gardens highly. Initially most of the inhabitants of the mission lived in hartebeest houses (Backhouse:1844:385) but by 1848 Shaw comments favourably on the colonial style houses that the Platberg Bastards had built for themselves (Broadbent:1865:200) which were estimated to be around 30 to 40 houses by 1851 (Schoeman:1988:36). A brick chapel and home for the missionary had been constructed prior to this in 1842. An inspection of this site in August 2013 confirmed that numerous rectangular stone foundations, stone walling and middens are still clearly visible. The mission station also housed the precious Wesleyan printing press which travelled around with Rev Giddy, a trained printer who was the resident missionary at Platberg from 1845 to 1856/7. One of the buildings was used to set up a trading store by a family of British traders in the 1850s. The Platberg Bastards also owned horses and wagons, besides flocks of cattle and sheep. It possible that sheds and stables may have been constructed to house the wagons and horses.

The Platberg Bastards farming efforts were highly successful and by the 1840s the Platberg Mission station was agriculturally self sufficient. They traded their wheat with the white frontier pastoralists and other groups in the area (Schoeman:1989:33). As it was reported that the Bastards harvested wheat was trampled by horses driven around a circular thrashing floor it is possible that evidence of this activity may be found (Wesleyan Notices:1843:299). The Bastard men are recorded as setting off on horseback on hunting expeditions. The wagons followed in order to transport the spoils of the hunt. Trade was a very important part of the Bastard economy beyond the borders of the colony and coupled with raiding underpinned the Bastard economy (Penn:2005:281) Ivory, skins and ostrich feathers were traded for alcohol, guns and ammunition, the latter items were essential for their survival in the frontier zone. In addition to hunting for ivory, the Griqua traded for ivory with the Tlhaping, Rolong and Ngwaketse (Ross:2009:16).

By drawing on historical sources and from a careful archaeological investigation of this site, the changing settlement patterns, changing economic fortunes, and political history of the site will hopefully be uncovered and a great wealth of information will be obtained about the Bastards, the missionaries and their neighbours. I am sure that there will be plenty to be said with regard to this station.

Aims of research

To investigate the layout of the mission site in order to determine how it expanded or contracted over time.

To investigate the layout of the station to see whether different groups within the settlement can be identified and whether different activities (ie: the thrashing floor, the area in which the printing press was housed)

To look at whether the religious aspect of the station influenced the social, political and economic lives of the inhabitants of the village.

To look at the part that Platberg played, economically and politically within the group of Wesleyan Mission Stations in Bechuanaland and within Caledon River Valley and all its neighbours.

An attempt to answer these research questions will entail a thorough literature search as well as an archaeological investigation. Firstly the entire mission station needs to be mapped and surveyed. Thereafter excavations of different areas, identified in the survey will be undertaken. All the material recovered from the excavation will be analysed and stored at University of Cape Town.

In addition to the archaeological component of the investigation a thorough literature search will be made which will comprise of current academic studies as well as historical accounts of the Wesleyan missionaries and early travellers to the Caledon River Valley.

Graham makes the point that historical documentation naturally places importance on the story and views of the European colonisers, whereas archaeology with its focus on material culture of all of the inhabitants of a mission station allows the voices of the flock to be heard (Graham:1998:27). All that we currently know about the Platberg Bastards is through missionary letters, reports and journals, official government reports and letters, as well as traveller accounts, in other words, the views of the colonials who were outsiders in this society. They often wrote in sweeping generalisations and the day to day lives of the Bastards were in general ignored. The archaeological investigation will I hope allow us to balance this view as well as giving us a more rounded and richer picture of the Platberg Bastards.

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