

## **The political economy of a nineteenth century mission station: the archaeology of Botshabelo**

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Missions are, as yet, an understudied topic in South African, indeed, African archaeology. The proposed research at Botshabelo, a nineteenth century Berlin Missionary Society station situated outside Middelburg, Mpumalanga will investigate both the internal and external political, economic and social relations of the people who lived there. Drawing on archaeological, documentary and oral sources the history and chronology of settlement, as well as the changing settlement patterns at the site will be uncovered. The role of Botshabelo in the regional economy and political landscape will be delineated and placed within the broader context of missionary activity in southern Africa as a whole. The current value of Botshabelo as a heritage resource will be evaluated. Discussion will be held with Botshabelo management as to how the research can help to increase this value.

In 1904 South Africa was home to over 600 mission stations, with over 4 000 mission outstations (Japha et al 1993). By that time, missionaries from a wide variety of mission societies originating from a number of different countries had helped to transform the way of life of numerous South African communities, forging social, political and economic ties with local leaders and inhabitants, introducing new forms of architecture, consumption and ways in which people related to one another, in addition to new forms of worship.

The proposed archaeological study will comprise a sustained enquiry into the political economy of one of the most iconic and important mission sites of the nineteenth century – the Berlin Missionary Society mission station at the site of Botshabelo in what is today Mpumalanga. Botshabelo, established in 1865, grew to become one of the most economically successful and well-established Berlin Missionary Society stations, and was home to thousands of inhabitants. As such, it was an important place in both local and regional economies. Later on, as a school, it helped to produce many of South Africa's most active black intellectuals and artists such as Gerard Sekoto, Dan Rakgoathe, and Wally Serote (Langhan 2000). I am interested in discerning both the internal functioning of the mission station as a self-sustaining religious, economic and political community and its relationship with the broader nineteenth-century landscape populated by African polities, Afrikaner republics, and the diverse personages of any colonial-era landscape.

### *Nineteenth-century Context*

Botshabelo, meaning 'place of refuge' was established in 1865 by two missionaries belonging to the Berlin Missionary Society, Alexander Merensky and Heinrich Grützner after they and the community fled from a conflict with Sekhukhune. The community at Botshabelo prospered throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and was soon economically self-sufficient in terms of agricultural and other production. Its blacksmithing and wagon-building shops served the wider region and they produced their own bricks. There was also a mill, bookbindery and printing workshop on the property (Langhan 2000). Botshabelo thus became one of the most economically viable and successful mission stations of all of the Berlin Mission Stations in what was then the Transvaal (Japha et al 1993: 19).

### *Aims of the research*

The aims of the proposed research are as follows:

1. To investigate the landscape of the mission site in order to determine how it expanded over time. For example, are there any archaeological traces of the initial settlement of the site before permanent accommodation was built?
2. To document the settlement layout of the mission station in order to identify which sections of the settlement can be associated with either different groups within the community or different economic/productive activities.
3. To examine the intersection of religious, political and economic life at the mission station and how it impacted internal relationships between different parts of the community.
4. To examine the role that Botshabelo played within the larger, regional economy as both a provider of services but also as consumers.

In order to answer the research questions posed, I intend to gather comparative archaeological, documentary and oral historical material relating to the settlement and history of the site.

### *Archaeological sources*

The archaeological component of the research will be two-pronged in its approach. The first comprises of *survey*, the second of *excavation*. The survey will work to locate and identify any archaeological remains in the vicinity of the mission station or on the station itself, including sites that may predate the establishment of the mission station itself. A sample of loci on the mission station will be chosen for further investigation through excavation. Excavation can help to clarify questions of chronology, settlement pattern and organisation, as well as providing material assemblages that can be used to answer deeper questions about the social and economic relations at the site.

All archaeological fieldwork will be carried out in line with both Unisa's code of ethics as well as the best practice stipulated in the constitution of the Association of Southern Africa Professional Archaeologists (ASAPA). The excavations will also be used to train students in the Department of Anthropology & Archaeology at Unisa but they will work under the supervision of Unisa staff and senior students who have extensive fieldwork experience. All material recovered from the excavations will be processed and analysed by the researcher or students working under her at Unisa and will be stored, as per legal requirement, in the department's museum storeroom which is a recognised legal repository.

### *Documentary Sources*

In addition to the published literature including both academic studies and early traveller accounts, I will seek out additional information that may exist in the archives of bodies such as Unisa, the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria; the Middelburg Municipality, and the Architecture Department at the University of Pretoria.

### *Oral Sources*

Where possible, interviews will be conducted with community members and/or their descendants. All participation in such research will be voluntary and subject to the code of conduct in Unisa's Code of Research ethics. I will avail myself of the services of an interpreter as necessary. All such interviews will be recorded and transcribed. There will be an option for the interviewee to remain anonymous if they so wish. The transcripts will be archived with the rest of the project information or destroyed at the interviewee's request.

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### *Proposed Timetable*

It is envisaged that the initial phase of the this project will last three years, at which point the Botshabelo community can evaluate if they would like further research to continue and can define which direction they would like it to take.

The following three year excavation programme is proposed:

2013: Conduct survey of the mission station at Botshabelo to locate area of village and agricultural production, cattle kraals, and other remains that may no longer be extant, as well as to locate those areas used for industrial production. Conduct test excavations at identified sites to locate areas for full-scale excavations in 2014. Honours student, Lineree Pienaar to conduct study of the graveyard.

2014: Full-scale excavations at selected number of residential huts and houses; Mapping and excavation of other economic/industrial components of sites including wagon-making/carpentry/smithing areas; Analysis of excavated material; M.A. student, Caroline Booth to be working on her research project (excavations to take place during the fieldschool)

2015: Complete excavations of areas identified in 2013 & 2014; Complete analysis of excavated material

2016-2017: Draw up educational material for museum site, including walking map delineating important archaeological areas; Publication and dissemination of results.

### *Outcomes*

The core outcomes of the project will be academic as the information collected will form the basis of a number of articles to be published in academic journals. The results will also be disseminated at both local and international conferences. Copies of all material gathered in the project including excavation records, copies of relevant literature, oral literature, publications arising from the project, photographic records and so on will be provided to the Botshabelo management authority for archiving. The research results will also be made available in popular outlets through public presentations and the provision of information to the press. Public education efforts will also play an important part in the outcomes of this research. It is envisaged that the research will provide data for a revised set of museum brochures and maps that can be used by visitors to the site. These would be designed in consultation with the management structure at Botshabelo. If necessary, the data produced by this and related student projects can be used to supplement/ form the basis of a Heritage Management Plan for the site. The researcher is willing to assist in the development/modification of such a plan as necessary.

### *Conclusion*

Lydon and Ash (2010) identified three features of archaeology that made it an important and valuable source for investigating mission stations. First, that archaeology can often shed light on what was not written down, i.e. on people's actual behaviour as opposed to the ideal behaviour that was reflected in texts. Similarly, about people who might have been overlooked in documentary sources, such as women. Second, that because archaeology focused on the material record it tells us about the mundane aspects of life that people might not have thought to mention in their written accounts such as family and gender relations; and third it provides us with alternative perspectives with which to look at the milieu of colonialism within the larger landscape. It is my belief that the proposed study of the Botshabelo Mission Station will help to do all of these things and I hope to make a contribution to the understanding of the importance of the site in South African history.

### *References*

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