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Report on historical rubbish midden at Kamfersdam

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Introduction

On 4 June 2001, I was called to inspect the site of a proposed borrow pit at Kamfersdam. The site was inspected in the company of Dr Hennie Erasmus, together with a surveyor and a contractor. It was found that the proposed borrow-pit is capped by a historical rubbish midden of the order of a century old, which is protected by the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999. Work on the site was halted.

A similar, much larger, midden exists on the north side of the railway line on Kamfersdam, where extensive bottle-digging has occurred, but where the National Monuments Council (now SAHRA) stepped in to control activities in the late 1980s (Brits 1993; Morris 1994). The midden at the proposed borrow pit has not been dug over by bottle diggers and is thus potentially much better preserved. It is also possible that it represents a remnant of the earliest phase of systematic dumping at Kamfersdam.

Field observations

A small sample of items was collected to obtain some indication of the age of the midden.

- Bottle fragments included a nearly complete "Codd" mineral water bottle of "Henderson Bros." This company was in existence in Kimberley, 1890-1907. The bottle fixes the age of the midden at approximately 102 ± 9 years (Lavostica & Lavostica 1982:87). Illustrated in Figure 1.
- Two mineral water "egg-ended Codd" bottle fragments, each with portions of the inscription "A.E. Bradley" of Kimberley, fixing the age of the midden at 101 ± 10 years (Lavostica & Lavostica 1982:87).
- A bonnet doll in bisque-fired white clay. Lavostica and Lavostica indicate that "bonnet dolls, so named because a hat is moulded as an integral part of the dolls' heads...are rarely dug from South African dumps" (1982:78). It is thus particularly noteworthy that one such specimen was turned up during our brief and unsystematic inspection of the dump. Illustrated in Figure 2.
- A range of other glass and porcelain fragments; and several glass bottle stoppers. These included fragments of medicine and ginger beer bottles. See illustration in Figure 2 - from broken plate. [Plates from the Kimberley Sanatorium (1897-1902) have previously been found at Kamfersdam (Morris 1994)].
- Part of a mouth organ. Illustrated in Figure 2.

- Two horseshoes. Metal items are generally highly corroded - an indication that the dump is not recent. Horseshoes in an urban dump could bespeak an era before motorised vehicles became commonplace (although horse-drawn vehicles still plied the roads, bringing fresh produce to the Market Square, for instance, up to the 1960s). Metal (mainly tins) was recovered from Kamfersdam in 1918 (see below).

- Two fragments of bone. Organic remains appear to be rare. There is much evidence of burning, which explains the relative absence of organic remains.

Discussion

The midden contains elements that are probably about a century old (three identifiable items could date back as far as 1890, i.e. 111 years, although in each case they could be younger with known age ranges of between 102 ± 9 and 101 ± 10 years). This is in accord with what is known of the history of dumping at Kamfersdam.

The Kimberley Mayor's Minutes for the year 1898 record agitation for a "better system than the haphazard and unsatisfactory removal [of refuse] by private persons that had been in existence for some years" (Brits 1993; Morris 1994). A railway extension was constructed from the "Kimberley-Bechuanaland" line, to a siding where loads were tipped into awaiting carts. Deposition commenced on 1 September 1899. Some 3000 loads were deposited before the Siege of Kimberley interrupted the project in October 1899; but it was soon continued and the railway was extended another 144 yards in 1900, with dumping rates reaching up to 40 loads per day. Dumping at Kamfersdam was discontinued in 1921, when old quarries around town were brought into use for combined waste management and land reclamation. Metal, especially in the form of condensed milk and jam tins, was recovered from Kamfersdam Dump in 1918 (Brits 1993; Morris 1994).

Conclusions and recommendation

By virtue of its age and as an old municipal rubbish dump, the site is protected by the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999, and may not be disturbed except in terms of a permit issued by the South African Heritage Resources Agency. The National Monuments Council's (now SAHRA) brochure "Archaeology for planners, developers and local authorities" states that "sites worthy of conservation include...old municipal rubbish dumps" (Deacon 1992:3).

On the significance of such sites, Sampson makes the point that "any community still in possession of its original ash-heap is most fortunate indeed...[it is] a most precious cultural heritage". He explains that this is so "because an ash-heap is the only really accurate, undistorted and sensitive record of a community's past...archives and documents record the deeds and decisions of such worthies as councillors, mayors and pastors [while] the humble ash-heap reflects an entirely unconscious picture of the real life and times of the community" (1991:9).

It is suggested that a representative sample of the midden be excavated in order to assess its significance before any further decision is taken.

The fact that this midden has not been extensively exploited by bottle-diggers - as the other Kamfersdam dump has been (along with several other similar deposits, e.g. the Kemo dump, and those on the Kenilworth Road) - means that its integrity, as an archaeological deposit, may be higher, and it may on that account be more conservation-worthy. If deposition at Kamfersdam was extended outwards from Kimberley (it is unlikely to have been extended inwards), it is then also possible that this midden represents the oldest phase of dumping at Kamfersdam.

Steps to be taken

1. Report the find to the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) in Kimberley and Cape Town. (The matter was reported telephonically to SAHRA Kimberley on 5 June 2001; copies of this report to be submitted to Kimberley and the national office).
2. Undertake more detailed investigation.
3. Investigate possible alternative borrow pit sites.
4. Prepare permit application to SAHRA depending on more detailed recommendations and/or outcome of alternative borrow pit investigation as in 2 and/or 3 above.

References

- Brits, L. 1993. Kimberley's refuse dumps. *Bottle and Bygones Newsletter* 9:1-2.
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