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INVESTIGATION OF AN EARLY IRON AGE SITE IN THE MAKGABENG AREA, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

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Abstract

A survey of the Blouberg/Makgabeng area in the Limpopo Province has revealed a number of Early Iron Age sites. Preliminary excavations were undertaken on a number of these sites. This article focuses on the results of an excavation on one of these sites. This site, on the farm Lomonside in the Bochum district (Limpopo Province), was radiocarbon dated to the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Pottery analyses link the site to the first and second phase of the western stream of the Early Iron Age. Other cultural material retrieved from the site includes iron objects, iron slag, tuyères, worked bone and ostrich eggshell beads.

Abstrak

'n Ondersoek in die Blouberg/Makgabeng gebied in die Limpopo Provinsie het 'n aantal Vroeë Ystertydperk-terreine blootgelê. Voorlopige opgrawings is op 'n paar van hierdie terreine gedoen. Hierdie artikel fokus op die resultate van 'n opgraving op een van hierdie terreine op die plaas Lomonside in die Bochum-distrik (Limpopo Provinsie). Radiokoolstofdaterings dateer die terrein na die 9de en 10de eeue n.C. Ontledings van potwerk verbind die terrein na die eerste en tweede fases van die westelike stroom van die Vroeë Ystertydperk. Ander kulturele materiaal sluit yster voorwerpe, ysterslak, tuyères, verwerkte been en volstruiseierdopkrale in.

Introduction

Archaeological research has been done quite extensively in parts of the Limpopo Province over the past few decades, especially in the Limpopo River valley in the north and the Waterberg area to the southwest. However, not much research has been done in the area of intervention. A recent survey in the Blouberg/Makgabeng area, revealed a number of Iron Age sites. Four of these have been excavated - two dating to the Late Iron Age (Van Schalkwyk 1994, 2000) and two to the Early Iron Age (Van Schalkwyk 1998). This report discusses the fourth excavated site.

The study area is located approximately 100 km northwest of Polokwane (Pietersburg). The plateau is characterised by two topographical phenomena: first Blouberg, an east-west mountain range and secondly an area referred to as Makgabeng, located south of Blouberg (Figure 1). Makgabeng is a highland formed by the Makgabeng Formation (a uniform yellowish sandstone), sandstone probably aeolic in origin and laid down from the northeast. The Mogalakwena conglomerate occurs sporadically (Brandl 1986:24).

The vegetation on the plain surrounding Makgabeng is classified as Sourish Mixed Bushveld, and on the highland as Mixed Bushveld (Acocks 1975). The Early Iron Age sites identified here are usually located where the Mixed Bushveld and Sourish Mixed Bushveld.



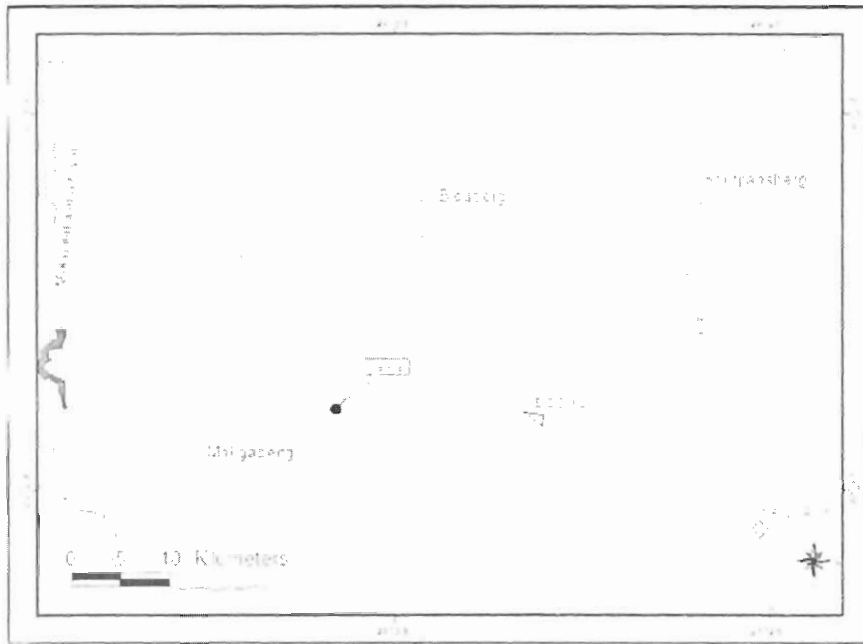


Figure 1: Location of the site in regional context.

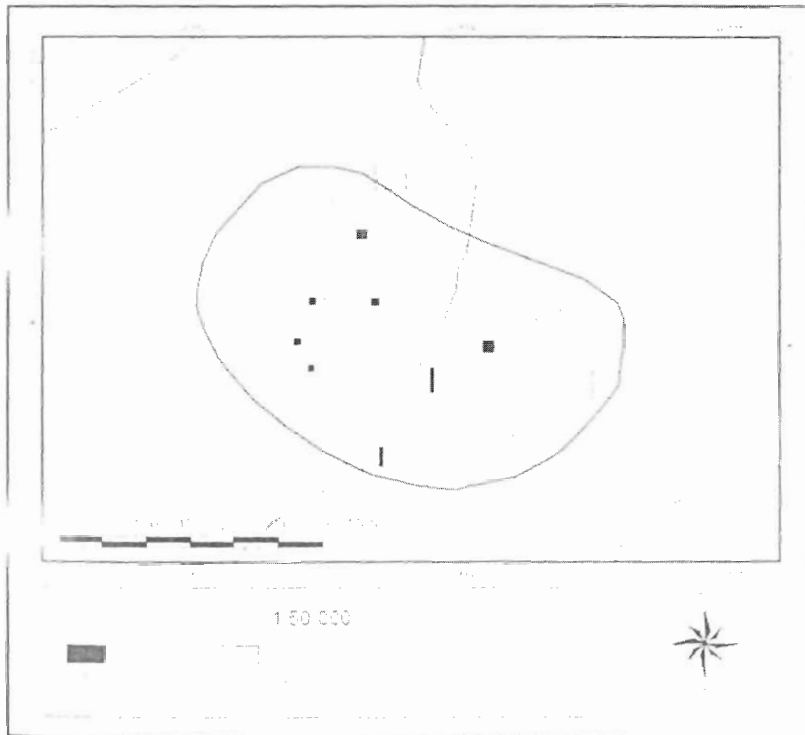


Figure 2: The site, indicating the position of the various excavations.

The site is located on the farm Lomondside 323LR (2328BD) (Figure 2), below the slopes of a high cliff (at the northern edge of the Makgabeng highland). It is located in the centre of an inhabited village. Unfortunately, this has a negative impact on the site, as some of the deposits are mined and used for brick manufacturing. Vast numbers of potsherds and related cultural material have been exposed due to mining. Some were retrieved and analysed for this report. Some areas (especially the top part) where a number of erosion channels cut through the site) have been denuded of vegetation, due to extensive erosion. The erosion impact is less at the lower or bottom part and on the eastern section.

The excavations

Due to the above-mentioned erosion, a number of features (which determined the excavation strategy) are visible on the surface (Figure 3). Because of the uneven topography, it was decided not to set out a grid over the site, but to excavate individual features that seemed to cluster together in a natural manner.



Figure 3: A pit feature eroding out on the site, exposing bone, pottery and stones.

Because the site covers a substantial area and is subdivided into different sections by streambeds, the possibility of multi-component settlement was suggested. This became evident with the analysis of the ceramics, and it was established that ceramics from both Phase 1 (Happy Rest) and Phase 2 (Diamant) occur here. Evidence of Late Iron Age and more recent occupation of the site was found. A Moloko settlement borders the site on the western side (Van Schalkwyk 2000) and a huge stone-terraced site of Venda origin is situated to the south (Van Schalkwyk n.d.).

Floor excavations

Excavation I (TM 1/1): A square of 4 m x 4 m was laid out over a concentration of hut dagha. Due to the hardness of the dagha, everything above floor surface was treated as a unit. Removal of the dagha revealed the remains of an iron hoe, cowry shells, potsherds and marula seeds (find next to the sherds). The material was found on a thin floor constructed of packed, smoothed clay. The edges of this floor were too uneven to determine its total extent and shape.

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Excavation 4 (TM1/4): The second floor was exposed by an excavation of a 4 m x 3 m block (concentration of hut dagha on the surface). A large number of potsherds were found. A similar excavation strategy was used for this feature. Removal of the dagha revealed a number of pots (some still in place) (Figure 4). A number of carbonised marula seeds was found in one of the pots. A clay pot (with the bottom deliberately removed) was found on the eastern side of the structure. Three hut poles were located behind this pot, at the edge of the floor. It was impossible to determine the size of this floor, due to uneven edges.

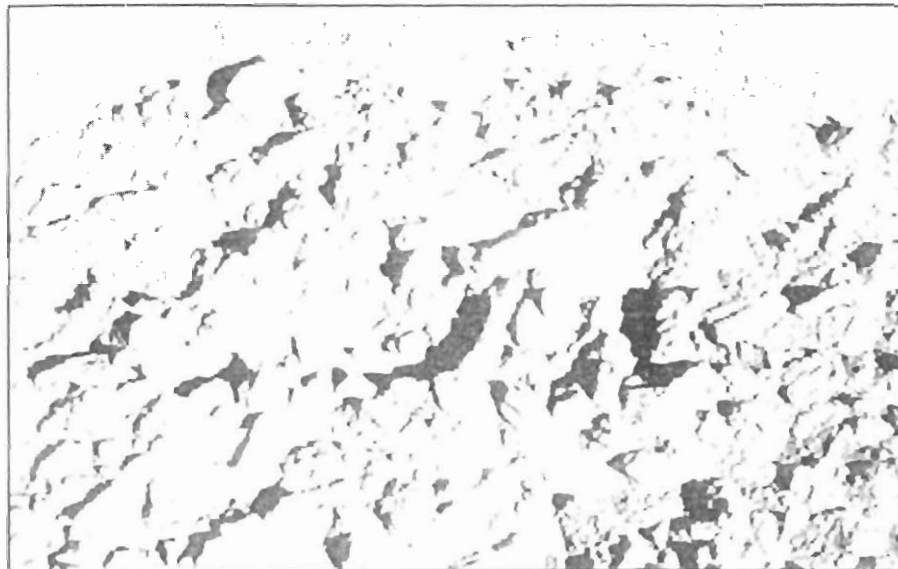


Figure 4: The hut floor in excavation 1, showing some of the pots still in place.

Midden excavations

Excavation 2 (TM1/2): A 1 m x 1 m pit was excavated in a midden in the central part of the site. This was done according to natural stratigraphy and arbitrary layers (10 cm thick). The excavation was 40 cm deep. A 1 m x 1 m square pit was excavated in a small midden on the eastern side of the site (excavation 3 - TM1/3). It was excavated in arbitrary layers (10 cm thick) to a depth of 30 cm. A small collection of potsherds, ostrich eggshell beads, faunal material and some bone tools was found.

Excavation 5 (TM1/5): A 1 m x 1 m block was set out over a pit feature. A number of potsherds, stones and a few pieces of bone material were excavated here.

The area around the original investigations was reinvestigated. Similar pottery was found east of the original excavations in trenches where clay, used for the repairing and building of houses, was used.

Excavation 6 and excavation 7 (TM1/6 and TM1/7): Less erosion occurs on the eastern side of the site. Two test trenches, (10 m by 1 m), were excavated. This was done according to 10 cm thick arbitrary layers down to a depth of 60 cm and 50 cm respectively. Some material was exposed, but no traces of floors or pits were found.

Excavation 8 (TM1/8) (4 m square). The excavation was done in an area with large quantities of slag and burned clay. Although the area produced material relating to smelting activities, no traces of smelting or smelting activities were found.

Excavation 9 (TM1/9) comprised a series of squares (3 m x 3 m). The excavation was never completed due to the intervention of the local "comrades" who were not accommodated as fieldworkers. The squares were excavated according to arbitrary layers of 10 cm thickness down to 20 cm. The excavation exposed a layer of packed stone, probably the base of a grain bin (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Grain bin platform in excavation 9.

Exposed material

Hut remains

The finding of hut structures was significant. Both excavated floors (ranging in thickness from 2 cm to 5 cm) were associated with Phase 1 (Happy Rest) pottery – classes 1 - 4 and 7 - 8 (Figures 6 & 7). The floors were laid directly on the original surface. Collapsed wall dagha indicated impressions of sticks on the one side, but are smooth on the other side. Many of these impressions are square, indicating that *Grewia flavescens* (rough-leaved raisin bush) branches were used in the construction of the walls. Grass impressions were also found. The curvature on the larger pieces of clay fragments suggests that the structure was plastered on the inside.

The size of the remaining floors (1.53 m and 1.87 m in diameter, respectively) and the amount of wall dagha suggest that these might have been hut structures. Whether these structures are rather granaries, is debatable (see Whitelaw 1993:77).

The pottery retrieved from these features is dated to the same age as the rest of the site.

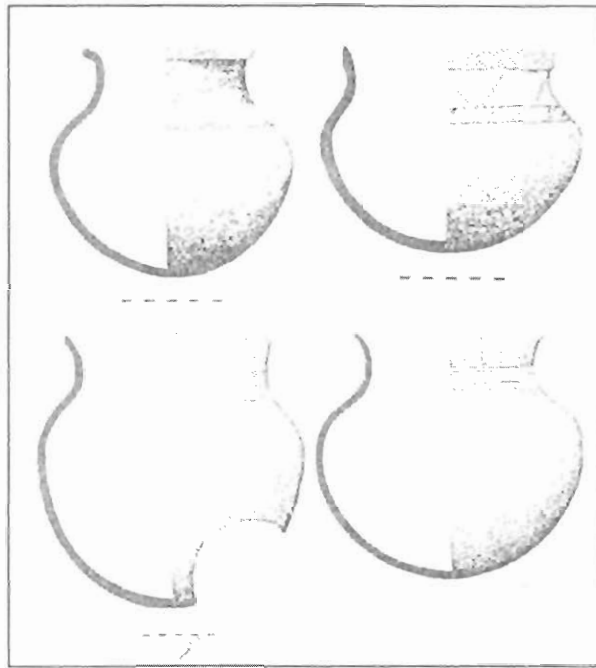


Figure 6: Pottery classes 1-3.

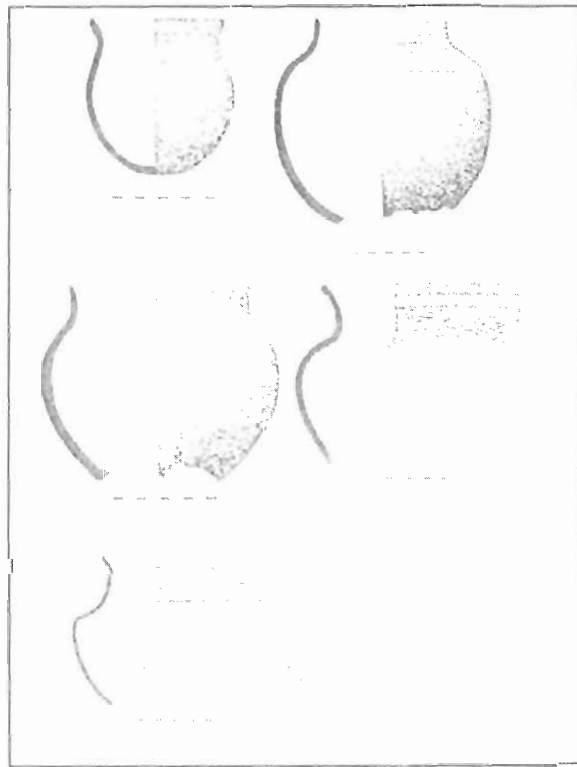


Figure 7: Pottery classes 4-8.

Middens

Two small refuse middens were identified on the western portion of the site and they were excavated. It appears as if a large midden, or the remains of a cattle byre occurred on the eastern portion (where erosion was less of a factor). However, the excavation was not completed, due to reasons mentioned earlier.

Pit remains

The remains of at least 32 pits were found (Figure 3). Their location seems to be irregular and they are located close to hut remains. It is not possible to link any of the pits to a particular hut, as they would have originally been located below the surface. Pits found in erosion channels were 75 cm below the current surface.

The pits were small and contained the remains of three different pottery vessels and a number of stones. Some bone pieces could be associated with specific pit remains. Most of the bones were very small and non-diagnostic in nature. No human bones were identified. Later reconstruction revealed that all the pots were nearly complete, with their bottom sections deliberately removed.

The buried pots from which the bottoms were removed and the presence of other material such as faunal remains and stones, is a well-documented aspect of the Early Iron Age in South Africa. Whitelaw (1993) uses ethnographic data to argue that these pots reflect their use in female initiation ceremonies, and are then carefully disposed of to avoid the attention of witches or to remove potentially polluting items by burying them.

Graves

Five graves of which four contained bones and pieces of skull protruding from the soil were exposed. According to the size of the cranial pieces, at least two were identified as adults. The graves were avoided, as it was not clear whether they were associated with early settlement or later occupants.

Pottery

As the excavated pottery sample was not large, the analysis also included surface material. Most of the surface material comes from the area where the local people dig out soil for building purposes. The ceramics were skilfully made, fired, and well decorated.

Fifty-six different vessels (three without any decorations) were identified after reconstruction. The pottery was analysed according to procedures proposed by Huffman (1980): decoration layout (position on the vessel), decoration motif and vessel profile.

Most (99%) vessels were decorated according to the incision technique, while punctate (8%) and comb stamping (3%) also occurred (because some techniques were combined, it does not add up to 100%). Appliqué decoration occurs on only two surface examples. These were too fragmentary to fit into a class, and were therefore omitted from the analysis.

The intersection of profile and layout modes produced a possibility of 72 classes, of which 13 are represented.

Class 1: Pot with everted neck and rounded shoulder, with single band of decoration on or immediately below the rim, spaced motifs on the neck, followed by a band on the shoulder (6 - Figure 6.1).

Class 2: Pot with everted neck and rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim, and a band of decoration on the shoulder (3 - Figure 6.2).

Class 3: Pot with everted neck and rounded shoulder, with spaced motifs on the neck, followed by a

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Class 4: Pot with everted neck and rounded shoulder, with band of decoration on or immediately below the rim and spaced motifs on the neck (1 - Figure 7.4).

Class 5: Pot with a straight neck and a band of decoration on the neck, followed with a band of decoration on the shoulder (2 - Figure 7.5).

Class 6: Pot with everted neck and rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim (4 - Figure 7.6).

Class 7: Pot with everted neck and shoulder that is well defined, with band of decoration on or immediately below the rim; band of decoration on the neck, followed by motifs on the shoulder (2 - Figure 7.7).

Class 8: Pot with everted neck and well-defined shoulder and band of decoration on the neck (3 - Figure 7.8).

Class 9: Pot with everted neck and well-defined shoulder, band of decoration on the neck, followed by spaced motifs on the shoulder (2 - Figure 8.9).

Class 10: Pot with curled lip and band of decoration on the lip (1 - Figure 8.10).

Class 11: Pot with straight neck, band of decoration on the lip, followed by band of decoration on the shoulder (3 - Figure 8.11).

Class 12: Pot with straight neck, with band of decoration on or just below the lip (1 - Figure 8.12).

Class 13: Pot with straight neck, band of decoration on the shoulder and spaced motifs below that (1 - Figure 8.13).

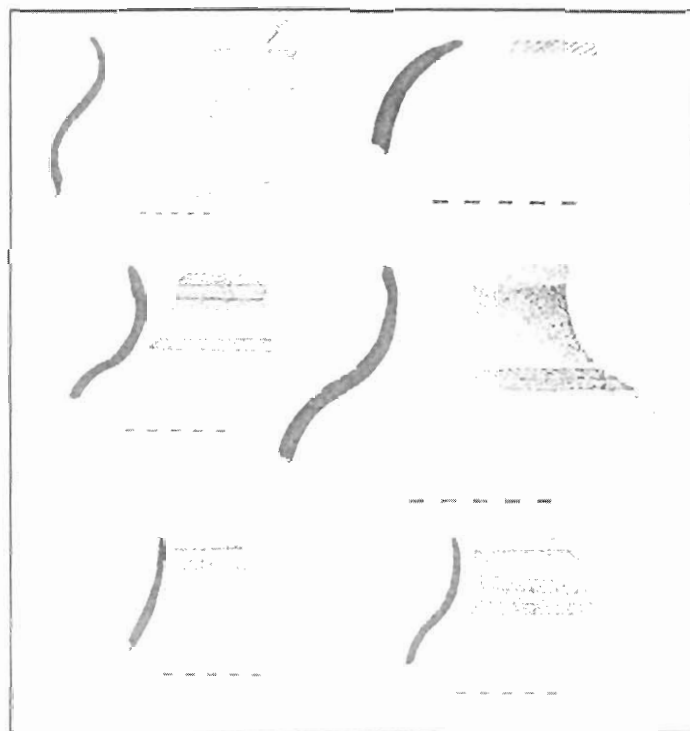


Figure 8: Pottery classes 9-13.

The author added two classes for undecorated pots (not illustrated):

Class 14: Pot with everted neck and well-defined shoulder (1).

Class 15: Pot with narrow, straight neck and poorly defined shoulder (2).

The data show that vessels from class I had the most defining features, followed by class 6. Although a small collection, the Millbank assemblage provided enough evidence to relate it to the second phase of the Early Iron Age, although some later material, i.e. Zhizo, occurs (Figure 7.5). The latter comes from a different Early Iron Age stream, with its capital Schroda located in the Limpopo River basin.

Other ceramic objects

Five discs, produced from potsherds into a circular form, were retrieved. Some were possibly 'blanks' for spindle whorls, or used as stoppers for making sour milk (see Van Schalkwyk 1981). Two of these have markings on the convex side of the disc: one has a cross cut into it and the other a small hole in the centre. These might be either earlobe plugs or gaming pieces (see also Whitelaw 1993:66).

Faunal remains

The faunal material consisted mainly of fragmented pieces. An analysis of the faunal sample recovered indicates that domesticated animals (sheep, goats and cattle) were more common than non-domesticated species. Larger and smaller animals such as blue wildebeest, zebra, giraffes, kudu, ostriches, steenbok, impala, jackal, tortoises, large rodents, hares, guinea fowl and small and medium sized birds were also identified.

The sample is too small to determine slaughtering patterns, but it seems as if animals of all ages, with a preference to adults, were slaughtered.

Worked bone

Several bone points (the length vary between 64 mm and 84 mm) and an awl (length, 79 mm) with one end sharpened were found (Figure 9). A large piece of polished bone (96 mm x 43 mm) was found on the surface. The object's function is unknown.



Figure 9: Bone tools.

Shells

Four cowry shells were found in excavation 1. The backs of these shells were removed, probably to attach them to a base. The shells are similar to those found on other Early Iron Age sites in southern Africa and probably originated from the east coast (I Plug, personal communication, 1996).

Shell beads
A large number of shell beads were found, indicating a significant presence of shell work.

OES
Shell

Iron smelting
Iron ore was found in the area, but no signs of smelting were observed. It is currently assumed that furnaces were used for iron production.

Worked stone
A number of worked stone tools were found on the surface, including various types of arrowheads and spearheads.

Other stone tools
Large quantities of worked stone were found on the surface. The abundance of these tools suggests a significant stone tool industry.

Dating
Dates for the site are based on the Pretoria calendar, which is used for archaeological dating in southern Africa.

Western site
TM1/1/2:
TM1/4/2:
TM1/4/1:
found in site
TM 1/8/1:

Eastern site
TM 1/9/2:
TM 1/6/1:
TM 1/6/3:

The radiocarbon dates from the site are generally younger than those from other sites, suggesting some continuity or a later phase of occupation.

Shell beads

Average number of shell beads were recovered, especially from excavation I. The number and sizes are indicated in the table below.

	Small	Mean	Large	SSD	PSD	N
OES	3.6	6.37	9.8	1.40	1.39	103
Shell	2.6	5.34	8.9	1.49	1.48	81

Iron smelting

Iron ore (magnetite) and slag were found in the excavations and all over the site. Although there were no signs of a furnace, the slag quantities suggest that iron production took place at the Millbank site. It is currently impossible to link these finds with the Early Iron Age occupation of the site, as smelting furnaces occur near a Moloko site located a short distance away.

Worked stone

A number of grinding and rubbing stones for levelling floors were found in the formal excavation and on the surface. Small, microlithic types of scrapers were also found on the site.

Other stone types

Large quantities of small quartz crystals were recovered from the western section and a much smaller amount on the eastern section of the site. The length of the crystals vary between 5 mm and 20 mm. The abundance of crystals in excavation 2 (a midden) suggests a cache.

Dating

Dates for Millbank site are indicated below. Age calibrated for the southern hemisphere according to Pretoria programme (Thalma & Vogel 1993). The 1 sigma range is given, with the most probable calendar date(s) indicated in brackets.

Western section of the site:

TM1/1/2: 1190 ± 50 BP - 867(892)974 AD (Pta-6307) from charred marula seeds.

TM1/4/2: 1200 ± 50 BP - 857(887)968 AD (Pta-6306) from a hut post.

TM1/4/1: 1290 ± 50 BP - 696(779)867 AD (Pta-6309) from marula seeds retrieved from a clay pot found in a hut floor.

TM 1/8/1: 1270 ± 50 BP - 774(826,857)887 AD (Pta-7468) from charcoal.

Eastern section of the site:

TM 1/9/2: 1090 ± 50 BP - 971(997)1019 AD (Pta-8506) from charcoal.

TM 1/6/1: 1170 ± 40 BP - 883(912,951)980 AD (Pta-7478) from charcoal.

TM 1/6/3: 1190 ± 40 BP - 871(892)971 AD (Pta-7480) from charcoal.

The radiocarbon dating suggests that the sites that are located on the western side of the river are older than those on the eastern side of the river. This can be seen in the pottery. Although there seems to be some consistency between the assemblages recovered west and south of the stream, the western sec-

tion is predominated by Phase 1 (Happy Rest) pottery, and the eastern section by Phase 2 (Diamant) pottery. Zhizo pottery was later introduced to the eastern section. By AD 950, the Schroda site was in its heyday (Hanisch 1980).

Discussion

The site at Millbank seems to fit in with what is classified as the Central Cattle Pattern. A slight rise in the landscape on the eastern side of the site, indicates a cattle kraal. Hut remains, platforms for grain bins and pit features are irregularly arranged around the cattle. It is presumed that a similar situation existed on the western section of the site, with the cattle kraal probably located in the vicinity of the midden (excavation 2). Due to the extensive erosion of this site, this cannot be determined with certainty. The erosion, however, made the identification of smaller structures very visible.

The actual arrangement of structures at Millbank is not yet clear. The identified hut structures varied in distance from 4 to 18 metres from each other. The huts had well-defined floors, with walls consisting of poles plastered with clay (on the inside). Small platforms of packed stone were identified near the hut remains. They probably served as bases for grain bins. Burial pits containing pots, stones and pieces of bone occur at random intervals over the site. At least 32 of these were counted on the western side of the site alone, although there might be more hidden below ground level.

Due to poor preservation factors, the faunal sample at Millbank is very small. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to complete the excavations on the eastern side of the site. This might have revealed a better and more representative sample. The soil in the area is very sandy and is not recommended for planting millet and sorghum. No direct evidence of cereal production was found on the site, although two lower grindstones, with long, narrow grooves were identified, indicating the presence of cereals. The evidence of marula seeds indicates the collecting of seasonal wild fruits.

Because of the topography of the area (the steep cliffs to the south of the site), run-off water from the Makgabeng plateau would, in the rainy season, have been beneficial for cereal production. Small dams were probably built (as is practice today) for household and agricultural purposes. In fact, a number of these 'dams' occur down-slope on the northern side of the site.

Some microlithic scrapers, and large numbers of OES and bone tools were found at Millbank. The presence of these types of objects is consistent with other sites in the area, such as K2, Schroda and Pont Drift (see Hanisch 1980). The origin of these objects might be attributed to interaction with the San people living contemporaneously at Makgabeng. Pieces of Early Iron Age pottery occur at a number of Stone Age sites in this area, indicating that exchange might have taken place between the different societies.

The occurrence of iron ore and slag suggests that iron working took place at Millbank, though in contrast to Beuley a few kilometres to the north, there is very little of this material (Van Schalkwyk 1998). Also lacking are tuyères, which occur in large quantities at Beuley. Though some banded ironstone is found in the area, a viable local source for ore could not yet be identified.

The analysis of the ceramics, links the excavated site to the Early Iron Age. The ceramics of this site and the Happy Rest facies at Happy Rest and Klein-Afrika compares equally (Prinsloo, personal communication 1995; see Prinsloo 1974). However, some of the pottery might rather be associated with Phase 2, i.e. the Diamant facies found by Aukema in the Waterberg (Huffman 1990b:119). This is understandable as Happy Rest developed into the Diamant facies and then the Eiland. The latter was dated by Aukema in the Waterberg to AD 990. It also corresponds with the dating at Millbank.

Endnote

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Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1 Although the site was located on the farm Lomondside, the local people refer to the area as Millbank, the adjacent farm, with the boundary only a short distance west from the site. In keeping with local custom, the name Millbank is retained when referring to the site.

Acknowledgements

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