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SITE REPORT

MIDDLE IRON AGE SITE ON DEN STAAT [2229 AA 14C]

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. METHOD	4
3. EXCAVATIONS	4
4. PROVISIONAL ANALYSIS AND CONTEXTUALISATION	13
5. MITIGATION AND SITE REHABILITATION	14
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS, ILLUSTRATIONS AND TABLES

Fig. 1.	Site plan	5
Fig. 2.	Site plan with shovel test pits	6
Fig. 3.	Trench I square B	8
Fig. 4.	Trench I square I/1 levels 2-3	8
Fig. 5.	Trench I square M1	10
Fig. 6.	Stratigraphy along C-B-A	11
Fig. 7.	Typical K2 ceramic motif	12
Table 1.	Ceramic sample count	13
Photo. 1.	Members of group along datum line	4
Photo. 2.	Remains of beaker	7
Photo. 3.	Trench I square I/1	11
Photo. 4.	Bovid teeth and bone fragments	12

1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle Iron Age site situated on Den Staat [2229AA14C] is located at 22.12.35.6 S and 29.13.59.3 E. The terrace slope contained a homestead marked by burnt daga, a wide surface scattering of potsherds, with evidence of a central kraal. The site had eroded and was still busy eroding because of the slope of some 30 degrees. It was also determined that the central kraal was not on the highest part of the slope making accurate identification difficult. Animal disturbance was not that obvious on the surface as other sites excavated in the area.

The excavation formed part of a series of other excavations and survey of sites in the area done during July / August 2000 and September 2000 and was conducted between 1 to 21 July 2001. The aim was to look at the commoner sites within the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape. The indications are clear that a substantial increase in population between AD 900 and 1300 occurred within the Limpopo Valley. The aim was to try and resolve some of the questions surrounding agricultural production and its ability to sustain large populations of non-agriculturally productive units around the capitals and larger settlements.

A thorough survey of the area for sites pointed to most of the Zhizo settlements not being oriented towards the flood plain as this may have been a development during the K2 period in order to support the larger population densities. The site 2229AA14C is oriented towards the flood plain with the Limpopo River clearly distinguishable some 2 km distant. Most of the surface scatter of diagnostic potsherds clearly indicated a K2 site.

A selected sample of the more interesting features of the site is provided here rather than all the excavated trenches and material. No analysis of any material has been done. This will follow once the broader project of mapping these commoner sites nears completion. The intention is to provide an interim report to SAHRA to satisfy permit requirements issued in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act, 25 of 1999. It is hoped that the preliminary findings contained in this report may also assist in providing the bigger picture because there has been a tendency to look at the elite sites only.

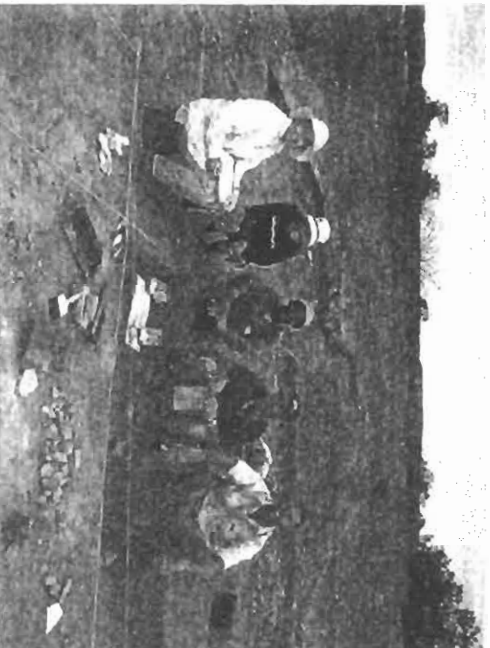


Photo 1. Members of the group with view towards south west along datum line.

2. METHOD

The site was approached with a view to obtaining the most amount of information about spatial arrangements of the settlement and its stratigraphy within the shortest period of time. A standard datum line was established running approximately South West to North East, through the cattle kraal to the edge of the site. The line was then used as a basis for a series of 3x3m excavations and shovel test pits. [see fig. 2.] Standard removal of surface material along the datum line, as well as earmarked trenches was done. Trenches were concentrated on the burnt daga that could clearly be seen embedded in the soil. Shovel test pits were also dug. Parts of the upper slope were washed out with the shovel test pits situated mostly on the erosion line. [see fig. 2.] The erosion appeared to be sheet run off rather than the typical donga formation. The excavation line stretched over 50 meters with excavations conducted as per fig. 1.

3. EXCAVATIONS

Three trenches are looked at here as well as 3 stratigraphic features.

Trench I square B

The trench bottomed out to hard neutral soil at about 30 cm with a shallow depression that underlay burnt dhaga/ dhaka to a depth of about 50 cm, probably from grain bins and a deeper narrower pit adjacent to and slightly overlapping the shallow depression. Ashy soil with household debris, consisting of bones and pottery fragments occurred in both the depression and pit. [See fig. 3]

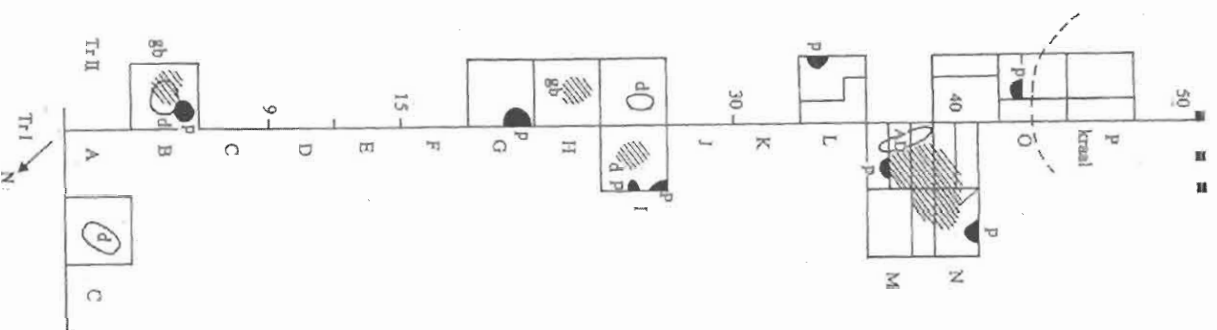


Fig. 1. Site Plan
along datum line
running approx
south west to north
east.

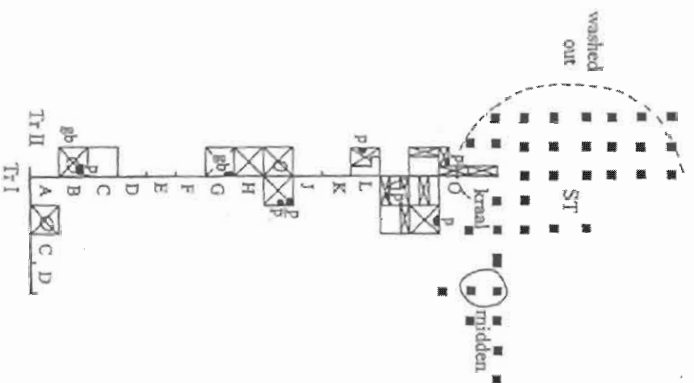


Fig. 2. Site plan along datum line showing shovel test pits and trenches.

Trench I square I/1/2-3

Two pits and 2 shallow depressions with grey ashy layers, burnt daga, bones and pottery started appearing at about level 2 [approx. 10 to 20 cm from surface datum line [see fig. 4]. Daga was removed from the depressions and pits. It appeared on first inspection that the daga had collapsed into the pits and depressions. This was born out by completion of the excavation, as well as evidence from the other trenches.

A large quantity of pot sherds and partial pots were excavated from level 2 into level 3. Substantial parts of a beaker were also recovered from this layer. [see photo. 2.] Level 2 represented the level immediately below the burnt daga collapse with the depressions and pits going into level 3. Bone and some charcoal was collected with most of the samples. Part of the lower jaw teeth of a bovid was recovered close to depression d2 in level 2. [see photo 4.] The pit P 1 [see fig. 4 and photo. 3.] was the deepest down to some 71 cm, P2 at 34 cm, depression d 1 and d 2 at 34 and 35 cm respectively.

Trench I/M 1

Pits and depressions were again very evident with a grey hard ashy deposit in one corner adjacent to the pits and depressions. Some animal disturbance was noted. Two holes inside two of the pits extended down to 200 mm and 70 mm. [See fig. 5] It is not clear why these were present.

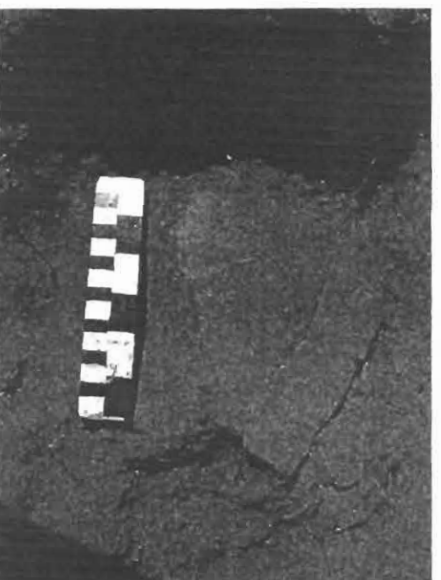


Photo 2. Remains of beaker with typical K2 motif.

Lip

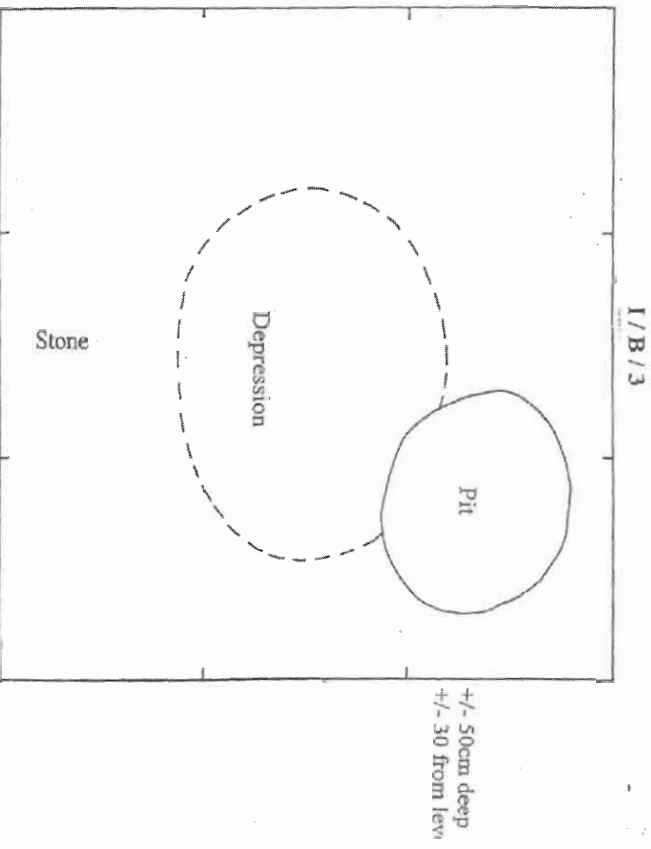


Fig. 3. Trench 1 square B showing a pit, depression and stone. The pit and depression starting at about level 3.

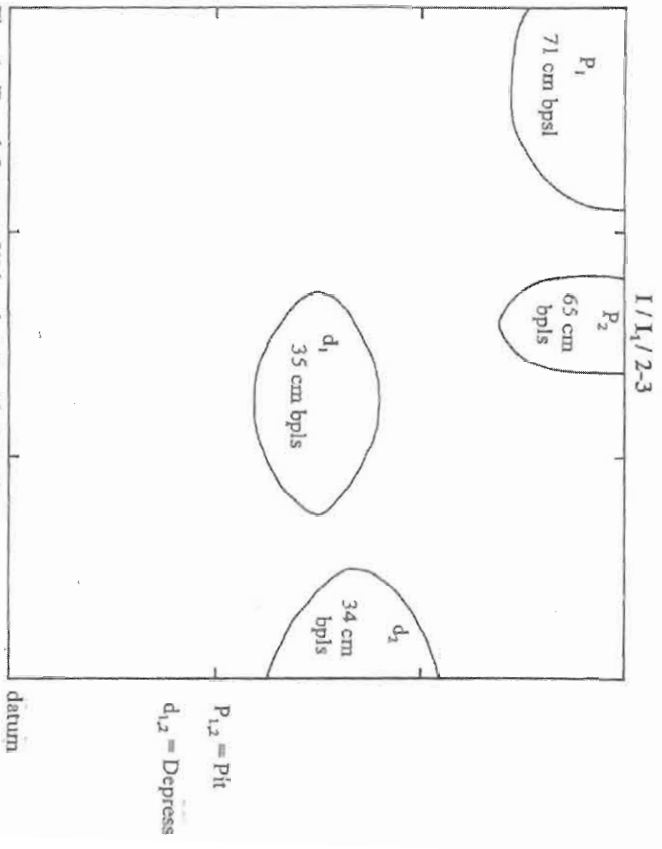


Fig. 4. Trench 1 square I/1 levels 2-3 with 2 pits [P1 and P2] and 2 depressions [d1 and d2].

Stratigraphy

Face along C - B [see fig. 5.1.]

The face along C-B showed an uncomplicated physical layering with grey red in levels 2-3, an ashy layer in level 3 and into the pit with the reddish brown layer denoting the end of the sequence or the original soil level. It is not clear why the ashy layer, with a quantity of bone, pottery and other material extends from the layer into the pit. Material may have been washed into the pit over time or the pit itself was used as a dump for household refuse when it no longer served a storage function.

Face along F - E [see fig. 5.2.]

The facia along F-E also showed an uncomplicated physical layering with grey red in levels 2-3, an ashy layer in level 3 with a reddish brown layer denoting the end of the sequence or the original soil level.

Trench N 1 and N 2

Stratigraphy

Face along C-B-A [see fig. 6]

The stratigraphy is similar to the above facia. A stone - which may relate to the grain bin or to the storage pit or may be a later incursion was situated in level 2 above the ashy layer. Some potsherds were also present. Again the evidence showed a slight depression and pit found in conjunction with the grey ashy layer that contained bone, charcoal fragments, potsherds and other debris.

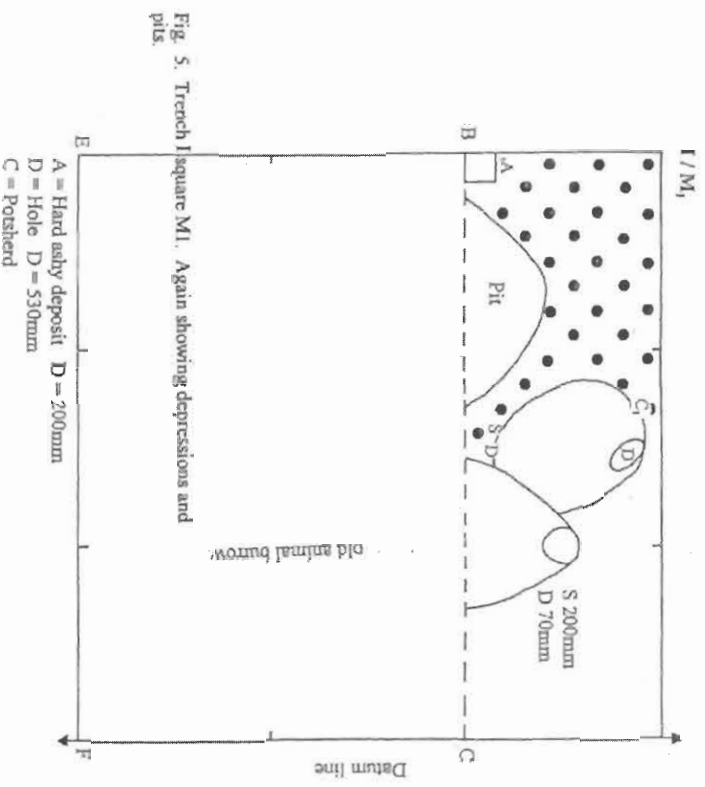


Fig. 5. Trench I square M1. Again showing depressions and pits.

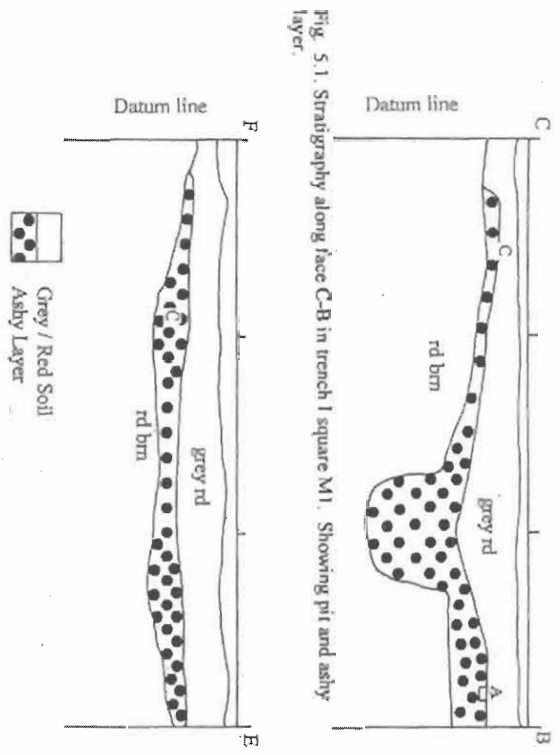


Fig. 5.2. Stratigraphy along face E-F trench I square M1 showing ashy layer.

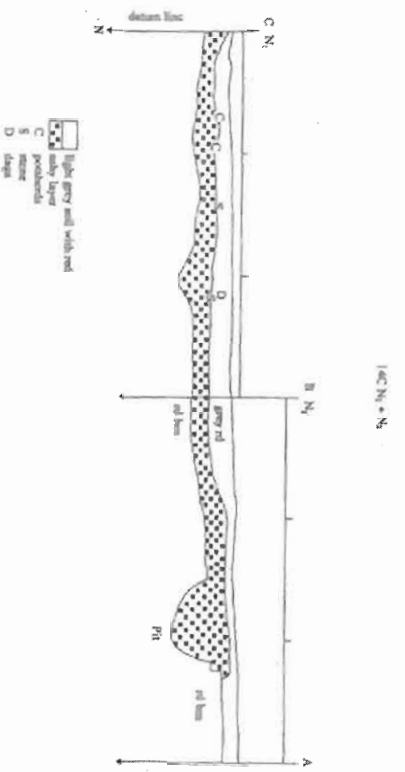


Fig. 6. Profile along C-B-A showing silt layer remaining from pit.

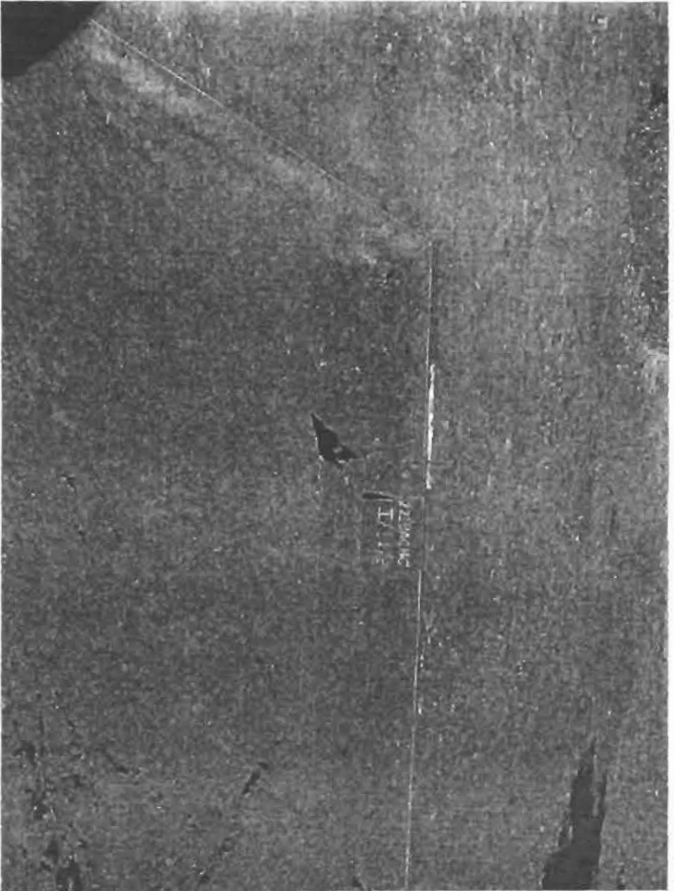


Photo 3. Trench I square I/1 levels 2-3 showing pit.

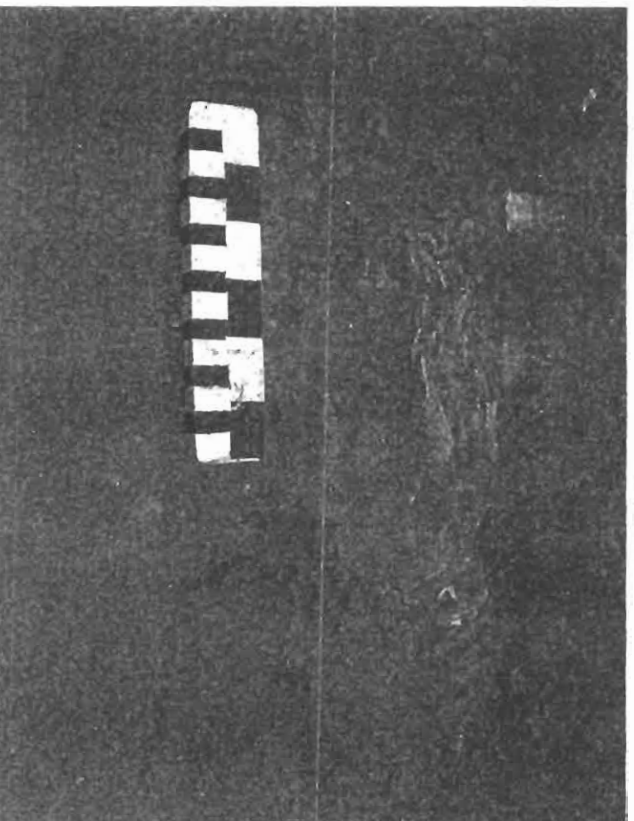


Photo. 4. Rounded base of pot, bone fragments [not identified] and teeth from Bovid jaw.

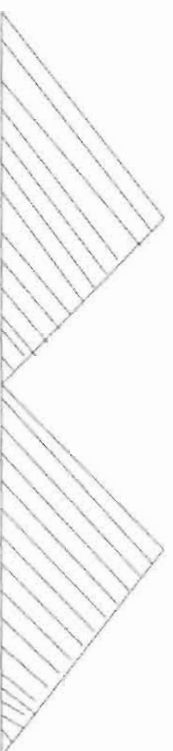


Fig. 7. Typical triangle and cross hatch motif indicative of K2 found in ceramic sample.

level	undecorated		rims	other	decorated			
	Plain	burnished			Zhizo	K2	Map	Khami
S	96	20	1	1	-	17	-	-
I	138	13	3	-	-	13	-	-
2	374	27	57	5	-	29	-	-
PII	126	11	6	-	-	12	-	-
3	42	5	3	-	-	-	-	-

Table 1.

4. PROVISIONAL ANALYSIS AND CONTEXTUALISATION

The spatial arrangement of the site conforms to the concept of the Central Cattle Pattern. What could not be located were the remains of dwellings, although trench *II* provided the charcoaled remains of stakes these were too thin to be aligned with hut structure. Similar evidence comes from the 2 other excavations. It has always been assumed with the CCP that the kraal in the centre of the homestead would be some distance from the living units. New evidence from the rehabilitation of Gardener's trench at K2 points to the living units directly adjacent to the kraal. This may be an indicator for K2 sites. We need to await McEdward Murimbika's publication and analysis of his data to proceed further with this hypothesis. Further excavation of the site to search for dwelling units closer to and possibly immediately adjacent to the kraal, may be necessary. Animal disturbance was not that obvious on the surface as other sites excavated in the area, but some disturbance was seen in the trenches while excavating. The shovel test pits were an attempt to establish the exact position of the kraal. It appeared as if the larger part of the kraal was washed out and situated mostly on the erosion line. Parts of the kraal were identified but no exact location or its extent could be determined. [see fig. 1] The erosion appeared to be sheet run off rather than the typical donga formation.

The site also contained relatively shallow deposit. This may indicate short occupation time as much as erosion. The grain bins, pits, depressions and kraal form a single K2 horizon with no Zhizo, Mapungubwe or other period diagnostic ceramics. The stratigraphy clearly indicates this as level 1 consists of 5 to 10 cm of red sandy soil, level 2 mostly consists of about 20 cm of homestead deposit with the floor bottoming out to the very hard, and mostly undisturbed red/ brown flood plain terrace. The analysis of pot sherds from Trench 1 square B also confirms a single K2 horizon [see table 1.]. Typical triangle and cross hatch motifs indicative of K2 were in the ceramic sample. [see fig.7.]

Of note is the occurrence of ashy grey soils associated with the depressions and pits. The depressions and pits are also new features not thoroughly looked from previous excavations. This may be because they were missed entirely or because they were not deemed important enough. Evidence suggests that these occurred at other earlier site excavations. [Huffman pers. Comm.] The occurrence of the depressions and pits with the burnt daga grain bins should also be noted. The pits may have been used for covered storage space, situated closer to the mens section - although some pits appear congruent to the depressions and grain bin daga, with the depressions used for storage of tubers. These may have been allowed to sprout and could be harvested as is currently the case in Zimbabwe. [Huffman: pers. Comm] These depressions would not have been covered making them difficult to distinguish from adjacent deposit. [Huffman; pers. comm.]

5. MITIGATION AND SITE REHABILITATION

To satisfy permit requirements and also to further best practice the trenches were back filled with the sifted soil from the excavations. Of concern is the apparent sheet erosion that may be exacerbated by loosening of the soil during excavation. Also if this proves not to be sheet erosion but another form - pipe erosion- common to soda type soils then the site needs to be monitored and approached differently. [Huffman: pers. Comm] Pipe erosion occurs at the base of the slope and does not start up slope. Water actually filters down up slope and washes out underground downslope causing erosion at the base of the site. Placing gabions would not suffice as the cause of the erosion needs to be addressed higher up where there are no indications of erosion taking place. [Huffman: pers. Comm.] A better site conservation

management strategy may be required. It is recommended that this is done by medium term monitoring to assess the effects of pipe erosion on the loosened soils of the excavation.

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