

ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT : RIETPUTS 15, WINDSORTON

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Background

The archaeology of the Windsorton area has been known for about a century and included classic sequences and sections described in the archaeological and geological literature from the 1930s (e.g. Sohnge *et al.*, 1937; Cooke 1946, 1949; Breuil *et al.* 1948; Van Riet Lowe 1952, 1953; Mason 1967; Partridge & Brink 1967, 1974; Helgren 1979; De Wit *et al.* 1997). The increased mining impacts since the mid-1990s, in particular, have devastated the sites in question and now virtually no original *in situ* material remains. Mere remnants of *in situ* sediments are on the portion of Rietputs now scheduled for mining.

Impacts

Mining in the Windsorton area has had a high negative impact on the archaeological and palaeoenvironmental resources there. The use of heavy earth-moving equipment to process vast volumes of sediment in the last decade has increased the pace of destruction exponentially. Protection was not included in the old National Monuments Act, since mining was exempted from its provisions; while the protections granted by new heritage legislation have come too late, or have been thwarted by a lack of co-ordination between relevant authorities (the Provincial Heritage Resources Authority [PHRA] in the Northern Cape came into existence only in 2003, and is not as yet operational). To engender a culture of compliance with heritage legislation in general, and in the alluvial mining sector in particular, will be one of the principal challenges for the Northern Cape PRHA once it is up and running.

The significance of the Rietputs sites relates to the record they held of the Stone Age cultural succession for this region, in a setting where dating procedures currently being developed could be applicable.

In an era when government is pledging its responsibility towards redressing neglected heritage (e.g. Mduyana in DFA 27 November 2003), we are under an obligation to secure at least a last remaining portion of the Rietputs sequence as a significant heritage site. The idea of reserving a witness section here has been hinted at (e.g. in discussions with the old National Monuments Council in the late 1990s); but not until now has such a suggestion been advanced as a formal proposal.

Observations

The principal focus of fieldwork in this investigation was on that portion of the Rietputs ... property north of the bridge, since this was where certain heritage features of the recent past were known to have existed (e.g. the cemetery, Halliwell's Store, etc), and where it was envisaged a witness section might best be set aside.

The following observations were made:

1. The historic building known as Halliwell's Store, that lay just north of the tarred road, no longer exists and a gaping pit stands where it was once situated. Given that the building in question was older than 60 years, was a permit issued for its destruction?

2. The cemetery is in a precarious state, previous mining having sheered away the surrounding sediments right up to the fence, itself hard against the graves. It is surprising that graves have not already collapsed out of the sections, as they will certainly do in due course if action is not taken to shore up the sides of the cemetery. (Mining Act regulations state that mining should not take place closer than 100 m without permission: a negotiated minimum of 25 m is the distance being requested by descendants in the case of the Schmidtsdrift burial grounds).

3. The river bank nearest to the cemetery includes *in situ* Riverton Formation Silts with Later Stone Age material, historic period ceramics and glass, and slumping bone fragments which may well represent one or more Later Stone Age (LSA) Khoisan burials (one bone fragment could have been a portion of a human tibia).

4. There is a small rock engraving site on the Ventersdorp outcrop near to this LSA site. A few geometric images, not unlike those at Nooigedacht, were noted.

5. Most of the river bank, island, and terraces east of the river have been devastated by previous mining. A lack of environmental control has effectively destroyed one of South Africa's classic Stone Age and palaeoenvironmental sequences, the wide significance of which, in terms not least of its dating potential - a key to understanding the Pleistocene cultural succession at regional level - cannot be overemphasised.

6. At the northern end of the property, at the base of a hill, are scattered stone-walled features probably representing dwellings of African labourers. Note: it may be anticipated that graves exist in the vicinity. The river bank adjacent to, and west of, this hill is relatively untouched by mining and includes *in situ* sediments, although few artefacts were noted. A calcified silt is overlain by upper Riverton Formation silts which, upslope, are capped by aeolian sands and slope wash. These sediments may be of considerable importance, and underlying colluvial rubble may turn out to be of significance for Acheulean material it might be expected to contain.

Recommendations

Proposal for preservation of a witness section

It is proposed that a witness section reflecting the classic Windsorton sequence be preserved for posterity and as a provincial and national responsibility, before the very last remnants of the site are destroyed. It appears that they are now under immediate threat of final destruction.

It was initially considered that a body of sediment could be preserved in the vicinity of (alongside) Halliwell's Store north of the road from Windsorton to Windsorton Road. But since Halliwell's Store no longer stands, it is recommended that the mining company, DME and heritage authorities (SAHRA and/or PHRA officials, McGregor Museum archaeologists) should meet to determine a suitable area for preservation as a witness section. The size of the area would need to be negotiated (suggest 50 X 50 m) and then fenced off and marked as a protected area in all relevant maps and documentation. Possibly the best situation for this would be a strip of land running alongside the present tarred road (but taking due cognisance of roads legislation). Indeed, it is to be observed that the only continuous transect of *in situ* material on the east bank of the river at Windsorton lies *beneath* the road, and it is recommended that in the event that the road should ever be mined away, a detailed archaeological and geomorphological study should be carried out as part of that process.

Rock art and LSA site

In the case of the *in situ* silts and rock engraving site near the cemetery, it is recommended that as far as possible the silts and the rock art site should be left untouched. It is however suggested that an investigation be carried out to determine the nature of the bones slumping

from the erosion feature. For any proposed mining in the vicinity a SAHRA permit would be required.

Cemetery

In the case of the cemetery, it is recommended that the sides of the graveyard be shored up and a fence erected 25 m out from the graves. Mining should then not take place closer than 5 m from the fence (which would otherwise be threatened with collapse in the same way that the existing fence is falling from lack of support).

Sediments at northern end of property

In the case of the *in situ* sediments west of the hill at the northern end of the property, an impact study prior to any possible mining would need to focus on multiple possible features, from LSA burials to possible Acheulean in underlying colluvial rubble. The hill itself has not been examined, and may well have engravings on it. Historical era stone structures would need to be examined more closely, and graves may exist nearby.

Permits

Given that prospecting in the vicinity of Schmidtsdrift had been halted until a go-ahead/permit had been issued by SAHRA, similar operations or mining activity at Windsorton should prioritise permit requirements and agreements/negotiations in terms of the above recommendations.

Where archaeological material or other heritage resources are likely to be disturbed, damaged, or destroyed, a mining company may proceed only if in possession of a permit issued for that purpose.

Conclusion

The intention of an archaeological impact assessment/scoping report is to help facilitate responsible development and mining while conserving the national estate of South Africa. The Windsorton area, like numerous other localities along the Vaal and other river systems of the central interior, once boasted a spectacular archaeological sequence testifying to humanity's ancient history on the African continent. More than most such areas, however, the sequences at Windsorton in particular were clearly stratified and well preserved, offering unique opportunities for research that would illuminate the antiquity and significance of sites regionally. Unfortunately, mining in recent years has all but destroyed these sites, with the last remaining vestiges being on the property that is the subject of this report. While salvage sampling would help to preserve some glimpse of this heritage, we are under an obligation to preserve at least a witness section, noting that advancements are constantly being made in dating and other analytical techniques, and it is impossible to anticipate what breakthroughs in knowledge will be possible in years to come. History will judge our generation by the way we choose to save or squander our heritage.

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