

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT
ASSESSMENT ALONG THE VAAL RIVER
FRONTAGE AT SYDNEY-ON-VAAL**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The author accompanied Mr Ben Benade and Ms Tania Anderson to assess impacts of possible mining along the river and adjacent terrain on the property of Sydney-on-Vaal.

This assessment is of a preliminary nature given the limited time available. Sufficient observations were made to give a general idea of the kinds of archaeological resources that exist or can be expected and the steps that would be needed to be taken prior to any mining in the areas in question.

2. BACKGROUND

The Northern Cape has a wealth of archaeological sites (Beaumont & Morris 1990), with locales along and adjacent to the Vaal River being of particular note (see also Burkitt 1928; Goodwin & van Riet Lowe 1929).

Stone Age material found in this area spans the Earlier, Middle and Later Stone Ages through Pleistocene and Holocene times. Of particular interest are Pleistocene sites along the Vaal River itself (e.g. Humphreys 1969; papers by Beaumont in Beaumont & Morris 1990; Beaumont & McNabb 2000). Late Holocene material with pottery is known to occur on the river banks, while rock engravings are richly distributed in the region (summary in Morris 1988), including a site on Vaalbos Park property immediately adjacent to Sydney-on-Vaal and in a setting comparable to rocky terrain on parts of Sydney-on-Vaal itself (Fock & Fock 1989). At present the existence of such sites on Sydney-on-Vaal cannot be ruled out.

In addition, terraces along the Vaal River have long been known for their association with archaeological and Plio-Pleistocene fossil material (e.g. Helgren 1979).

3. OBSERVATIONS

We commenced the inspection of the river bank at the bridge at the up-stream end of the property, stopping at several points along the river, noting surface traces, exposures and old mining debris heaps in order to get a feel for the kinds of archaeological material occurring there.

(a). *Summary of observations along the river from the bridge in the east to the confluence with the Harts River in the west.*

Within 1 km of the bridge there is a fairly broad floodplain of Riverton Formation silt. In this area some probable Middle Stone Age material was found within a palaeosol unit at the base of the uppermost stratigraphic unit within the silts, overlying a calcified unit.

A Ventersdorp hillside directly north of the Sydney-on-Vaal village has historic stone walling which probably relates to early diamond digging in the vicinity.

This same hillslope has Ventersdorp surfaces that may well support localised rock engraving clusters. The hillside, very similar in appearance to the known site on Vaalbos, would need to be checked thoroughly.

At one point immediately below the Ventersdorp and within the floodplain sediment there is a rich occurrence of 'fresh' Acheulean in a calcified unit. Typologically, initial impressions are that it resembles Canteen Kopje. This is likely to be an important site. It may prove relevant to debates as to whether these kinds of Vaal River sites are alluvial or colluvial in origin. In this instance the contiguity with a Ventersdorp hillside, and the state of preservation of the material, may lend support to the latter possibility.

Further downstream sections of river bank appear to remain relatively intact, where overbank silts may contain a succession of culture stratigraphic units, with Later Stone

Age material including pottery and possibly burials at or near the surface. In the vicinity of a drift near the Vaal-Harts confluence Later Stone Age material was noted on the surface.

- (b). Summary of observations along the river from the confluence with the Harts River to the end of the Sydney-on-Vaal property to the south.

Within a kilometre of the confluence the overbank silts are substantially thick and may contain a succession of culture stratigraphic units. On the surface pottery (thick sherds) was found that may have Sotho-Tswana or Type R affinities. Mining in extensive trenches is already occurring close to this. It is expected that precolonial burials would be found to occur in these silts, potentially with or without surface cairns. Access to the river bank vicinity was difficult along this stretch, so that direct observations are limited in the context of this report.

A twentieth century cemetery further downstream (designated "Cemetery 4" in Morris 2002), which is situated somewhat upslope from the river, is in a vicinity where extensive spreads of Later and possibly Middle Stone Age material was noted within the overbank Riverton Formation silts (Morris 2002). Such finds may be considered as a likely pattern for the greater part of the river bank along this stretch of the river.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

As intimated above, the river banks and floodplain sediments can be considered as sensitive from an archaeological perspective, with a wide spectrum of sites of variable age occurring. These are likely to include precolonial burials

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It would be preferable if mining was not contemplated in these settings. But should mining proceed, permits would have to be obtained from SAHRA, through the Provincial authority implementing the SA Heritage Act, and these should be granted only after more thorough Phase 1 and 2 archaeological investigations. Some of the sites noted would need to be researched in detail, and it might well prove desirable to camp off sections where mining would not be an option.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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