

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF AN EARLY IRON AGE SITE
ON VIENNA FARM, HOEDSPRUIT

A Report Prepared for Vienna Game Farms

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SYNOPSIS

An eroded spot on Vienna Farm contains Silver Leaves pottery that dates to between AD 280 and 420. The place was probably used to manufacture salt when the climate was warmer and wetter than today.

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INTRODUCTION

The farm Vienna 207KT lies in the lowveld about 4.5 kilometres north of Hoedspruit. The property is now a game farm for the private use of its shareholders. The daughter of a shareholder, Avril Harris, was an archaeology student at the University of the Witwatersrand. In September 1996, Ms Harris and Udo Kuslich, another archaeology student, reported an archaeological site on Vienna to the Department.

Artefacts included very early Iron Age pottery as well as Middle Stone Age flakes and the fossilized vertebrae of a rhino. The site was therefore worth investigating.

Two Departmental staff were in the area on December 12, 1997. The farm manager, Mr. G. Thompson, took us to the site.

THE SITE

The site (24.17.22S 30.58.42E) is located around an eroded area on both sides of a dry stream bed (Figure 1). Erosion had exposed a large pottery concentration near the stream on the north side and a few small areas on the south side, one with an intact ash lens. Some Middle Stone Age flakes lay near the large concentration, but more fossilized bone could not be located. We therefore concentrated on the ash lens and the large pottery cluster.

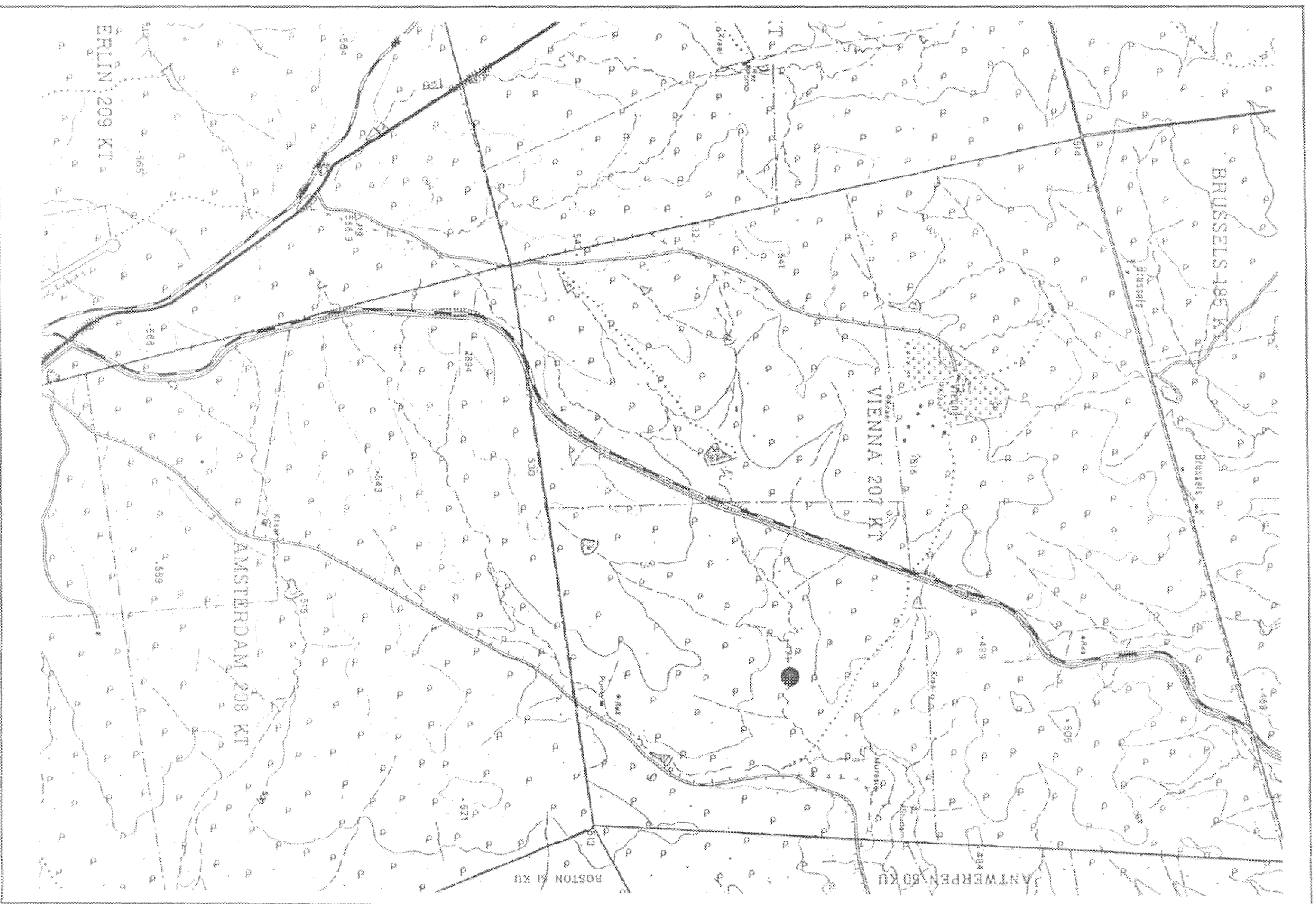


Figure 1. Location of Silver Leaves salt production site on Vienna Farm.

RESULTS

The cluster contained broken vessels that belonged exclusively to the Silver Leaves phase of the Early Iron Age. The vessels were almost all jars, in contrast to bowls, and this single form was common to the whole site. Further, the surfaces of many were eroded. This erosion had been caused by a chemical reaction with the soil.

The ash lens on the south side also contained Silver Leaves pottery. The 7 to 10 cm lens lay under a few centimetres of colluvium on the edge of an eroding bank. Jar fragments and other artefacts had slid down the bank from the lens. These artefacts included fragments of soapstone bowls and pieces of bone.

A small part of the lens was straightened with a trowel to create a vertical section. A few bone fragments and one tooth were recovered during this exercise. The tooth, a lower third molar, came from a domestic sheep or goat.

In addition to the artefacts, erosion had uncovered the natural stratigraphy of the site. A 20 cm horizon of dark soil lay on top of approximately 1 m of orange and yellow subsoil. The ash lens and pottery concentration lay in the upper dark horizon, but there was no sign of a village occupation. A thick crust of sodium, cut by the stream bed, lay under the subsoil. This natural stratigraphy is a clue to the use of the area during the Early Iron Age.

DISCUSSION

Silver Leaves pottery dates to between AD 280 and 420 (Klapwijk 1974) and represents the first black, Bantu-speaking farmers in South Africa (Klapwijk and Huffman 1996). As the first farmers, these people could choose the best land to cultivate. The dark soil on the site, however, is not particularly good for cultivation, or at least not for sorghum and millet, the principal grains.

Rather than a normal agricultural village, the site may have been used to produce salt. There are other salt-making localities in the lowveld, notably Eliand, west of Tzaneen (Evers 1979). At Eliand, salt-making activities produced numerous

dumps of jar fragments and soapstone bowls.

Generally, salt was produced by pouring saline earth and water through a grass filter into a jar. The brine was then slowly boiled to concentrate the salt. The salt itself was made into a conical cake for transport and trade (Witt 1966).

The use of the site on Vienna for salt making not only explains the pottery clusters and their proximity to the stream bed, but also explains the eroded surfaces of the vessels, the sodium rich crust and the absence of a normal village horizon. Presumably, the people lived elsewhere and only visited the site periodically.

We know from independent climatic data that rainfall and temperatures have varied over the past 2000 years (Tyson and Lindsey 1992). The dryness of the site today suggests that Vienna was probably wetter and warmer during the Early Iron Age when salt was manufactured there.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Vienna site, although eroded, still contains some valuable information about the role of salt in the local economy. Excavations of intact deposit, such as the ash lens, could reveal the nature of the periodic, temporary habitation and the salt-making process.

Future research in the area could establish where the people lived and where the soapstone was quarried. It will be some time before these topics become research priorities. We therefore recommend that the site is not disturbed.

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