Progress report on excavations at Ntshekane, conducted in terms of a permit from Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali (ref: 12/05)

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Ntshekane is an Early Iron Age site situated near Muden in KwaZulu-Natal. It was first excavated in 1973 by Tim Maggs, then an archaeologist at the Natal Museum. The site is heavily eroded, with abundant archaeological materials exposed in dongas and on the surrounding surfaces. The dates from the site were published in 1973 in the *South African Journal of Science*, along with dates from other Early Iron Age sites in South Africa, as evidence for the antiquity of the Iron Age chronology in this country (Mason et al. 1973). This publication refuted a position that held that Iron Age agriculturists had settled south of the Limpopo River only in the second millennium AD.

A report on the results of the excavations appeared later (Maggs & Michael 1976). It contributed to a complete revision of the Iron Age ceramic sequence that had been in place since the late 1940s (e.g. Schofield 1948). Consequently, the name *Ntshekane* was applied to the Early Iron Age ceramic facies that is prevalent on the site. *Ntshekane* dates to AD 910–1030. Subsequent research on other sites identified three additional Early Iron Age facies, each named after the site at which they were first identified. These are *Mzonjani* (AD 420–590), *Msuluzi* (AD 640–790) and *Ndondondwane* (AD 790–910). Around the time of publication of the Ntshekane site report, Maggs had come to suspect through a statistical analysis of the ceramics that the site contained two facies. We now recognize the second facies at Ntshekane as *Msuluzi*.

We have learnt much about the Early Iron Age since the 1970s. We now know that settlements of this period took some form of the Central Cattle Pattern (see Huffman 1990, 2001; Whitelaw 1994), versions of which still exist in some rural areas today. Our research, undertaken collaboratively with Professor Thomas Huffman of the University of the Witwatersrand, aims to use this settlement model to make sense of the remains at Ntshekane.

To this end, we mapped the exposed remains and excavated some features. This work revealed a third facies on the site, *Ndondondwane*, indicating that the site was occupied from the seventh to the eleventh centuries AD. There are two possibilities. Either the remains are those of a single, large and long-lived settlement like KwaGandaganda (Whitelaw 1994), or they represent a palimpsest of smaller homesteads as Broederstroom does (Mason 1981; Huffman 1990). Certain features are key to interpretation. These include pits, some of which contain dung and therefore indicate the location of cattle pens (e.g. Features 6, 11, 20, 22, 36) (Fig. 1). Granary and house floor remains,

Fig. 1. Feature 36, a Ndondondwane-phase pit exposed in the side of a donga. The pit contains dung.

by contrast, indicate residential areas (e.g. Features 2, 15, 19, 33, 79) (Fig. 2). Each feature requires dating. To a considerable extent, we rely on ceramic style to group features chronologically, but we also intend obtaining 20 or more AMS dates on charcoal. These dates will bolster the fairly meagre radiocarbon record for the Early Iron Age of KwaZulu-Natal. They should also help resolve one stylistic issue.

We are currently using a ceramic-style category we call 'late *Ndondondwane*' (Fig. 3). Pots of this category were first identified at Ntshekane, where they were regarded as a possible idiosyncrasy of a single potter (Maggs & Michael 1976: 725). Subsequent identification from KwaGandaganda in the uMngeni Valley indicated they were a widespread part of the sequence (Whitelaw 1994: 17), but the precise chronological relationship with *Ndondondwane* and *Ntshekane* remains an issue. Our work shows that 'late *Ndondondwane*' is fairly common on Ntshekane, so we must resolve this issue. Ideally we need larger and well-dated ceramic samples, such as from middens (e.g. Feature 5).

Some highlights

The excavation of human long-bones exposed in a shallow gulley exposed an adult burial (Feature 31). The individual had been buried lying in a flexed position on its left-hand side with its hands close to the face. Several large stones had been placed above the torso. These included a large

Fig. 2. Feature 34, *in situ* Ntshekane-phase granary remains.

Fig. 3. Feature 3-4, a 'late *Ndondondwane*' sherd washed from a midden remnant. Note the cord effect of the bands of decoration, which is closer in character to *Ndondondwane* than *Ntshekane*.

lower grindstone. A pot had possibly been placed over the hip area. The legs do not appear to have been tightly flexed, but gulley erosion had greatly disturbed the leg bones, of which only fragments remained. According to a model of burial position (Huffman & Murimbika 2003), these remains are probably those of a woman. The grindstone placed over the torso suggests that she was married. Her dentition was sufficiently well preserved to show that she had undergone dental mutilation, probably in her teenage years (given the results from previous excavations). The mutilation appears (without close inspection) consistent with that of other adult Early Iron Age burials in KwaZulu-Natal, where the pattern involved the removal of all four lower incisors and the upper two central incisors, and the labial chipping of the upper lateral incisors and upper canines to produce blunt points (see Morris 1993).

Excavation of an Ndondondwane-phase pit (Feature 1) exposed in the side of a deep donga produced two small cane glass beads, blueish in colour, from the Ntshekane phase village horizon above the pit. Three cane glass beads have been recovered previously from Early Iron Age sites in KwaZulu-Natal: one from the 'late *Ndondondwane*' Feature W at Ntshekane (Maggs & Michael 1976: 726), one from an *Ndondondwane*/'late *Ndondondwane*' context on KwaGandaganda (Whitelaw 1994: 38), and one from an *Ntshekane* pit at 2931AD 17 alongside the iZinkwazi River (KwaZulu-Natal Museum records). These exotic beads relate to the Indian Ocean trade system that in the ninth and tenth centuries was targeting ivory and metal from the region north of the Soutpansberg. KwaGandaganda yielded a related find, a glazed sherd of a pot made in the Basra (Iraq) area (Mason 1994: 3; Whitelaw 1994: 35). It is increasingly tempting to accept that some traders sailed south along the coast from the Chibuene trading post at Vilanculos Bay, perhaps to Delagoa Bay. Sailing conditions along this stretch of the coast are apparently difficult for dhow technology.

We recovered a further five cane glass beads from the remains of another pit (Feature 13). It is possible these beads came from a single necklace, because they are all of similar size and shape (and, indeed, closely resemble the beads from the Feature 1 excavation some distance away). Feature 13 also contained what appears to be *Blackburn* pottery. *Blackburn* is stylistically quite different from *Ntshekane* and marks the first appearance of Nguni-speaking agriculturists on the landscape. To date, Blackburn sites have been recorded only from the coastal belt (e.g. Davies 1971; Robey 1980), so Feature 13 is a significant find. The presence of *Ntshekane* pottery in the pit adds to its potential significance. Two interpretative possibilities come to mind. First, Blackburn agriculturists settled on the site after its abandonment by Ntshekane agriculturists and incorporated *Ntshekane* sherds from the older village horizon into their features. Alternatively, Feature 13 represents contact between Blackburn and Ntshekane agriculturists, a possibility that is especially exciting. Whitelaw and Hall (in press) suggest that contact between the two groups might have generated a social category associated with aspects of 'procreation' (e.g. iron production and rainmaking) that in later times provided the basis for the marginalized category, *amalala*. The ashy fill of Feature 13 also

contained considerable charcoal from which we hope to obtain high-precision radiocarbon dates. These and other dates from Ntshekane features on the site might help support one or other of the interpretative possibilities. Worth noting here is that we found another *Blackburn* sherd alongside *Ntshekane* sherds, all apparently washed out of the Feature 5 midden remnant.

Publication plans

Most immediately Whitelaw and Huffman plan a chapter for a book on cognitive archaeology that demonstrates the merit of applying anthropological models to the archaeological record. The Ntshekane chapter is specifically concerned with the Central Cattle Pattern and the chronological and spatial distribution of the archaeological residues on the site. The chapter is due for submission to the editors (Jannie Loubser and David Whitley) in mid-2016. The publisher is Left Coast Press in the United States.

The archaeological work on Ntshekane also demands publication of the detailed work in more traditional site report form. Details will emerge as the work progresses.

Acknowledgements

Tom Huffman, Carolyn Thorp, Bronwen van Doornum, Mudzunga Munzhedzi, Livhuwani Mulaudzi, Phumlani Madonda, Muzi Msimanga, Jeremy Hollmann, Justine Wintjes and Chrissie Sievers assisted with the fieldwork. The National Research Foundation (grant no. 90995) and the KwaZulu-Natal Museum provided funding and logistical support. The Langa family at Ntshekane provided access to the site. We are grateful to them all. No person or institution listed here necessarily supports the interpretations in this report.

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