

**SALVAGE EXCAVATIONS AT MICHELLE AVENUE,
ALBERTON**

A Phase-2 report submitted to Van Straten Associates

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INTRODUCTION

During 2000, the Alberton Town Council planned to extend Michelle Avenue across to Bellairs Drive in Glenvista. The proposed route went past two Late Iron Age stone-walled sites previously noted by Mason (1986:559). As a result, the environmental coordinators for the project, Disa Environmental and Enviropactice, commissioned Archaeological Resources Management (ARM) to assess the impact of the roadworks on the two archaeological sites.

ARM staff examined the area on 27 May 2000 (Huffman 2000) and recommended that one site (Site 2628AC38) should be cleared, mapped and test excavated before construction began. These mitigation measures were completed between 26 and 30 June, 2000, under Permit No. 80/00/06/003/51 from the South African Heritage Resources Agency.

THE SITE

The stone-walled site (26.17.392S 28.05.291E) stands near the corner of Michelle and Hennie Alberts, immediately north of Michelle extension (Figure 1). Aerial photographs show that the complex consists of at least three circular units spread around a small hill. Only the southern unit was endangered by the project.

A workforce supplied by the Alberton Town Council first cleared the southern unit of grass. A fortuitous veld fire helped to clear the site further. Mapping and excavations then began with the aid of First Year Archaeology students from the University of the Witwatersrand.

THE PLAN

The veld fire and mechanical clearance showed that some of the stone-walling at the southern end had already been damaged (Figure 2). Evidently, a bulldozer had pushed

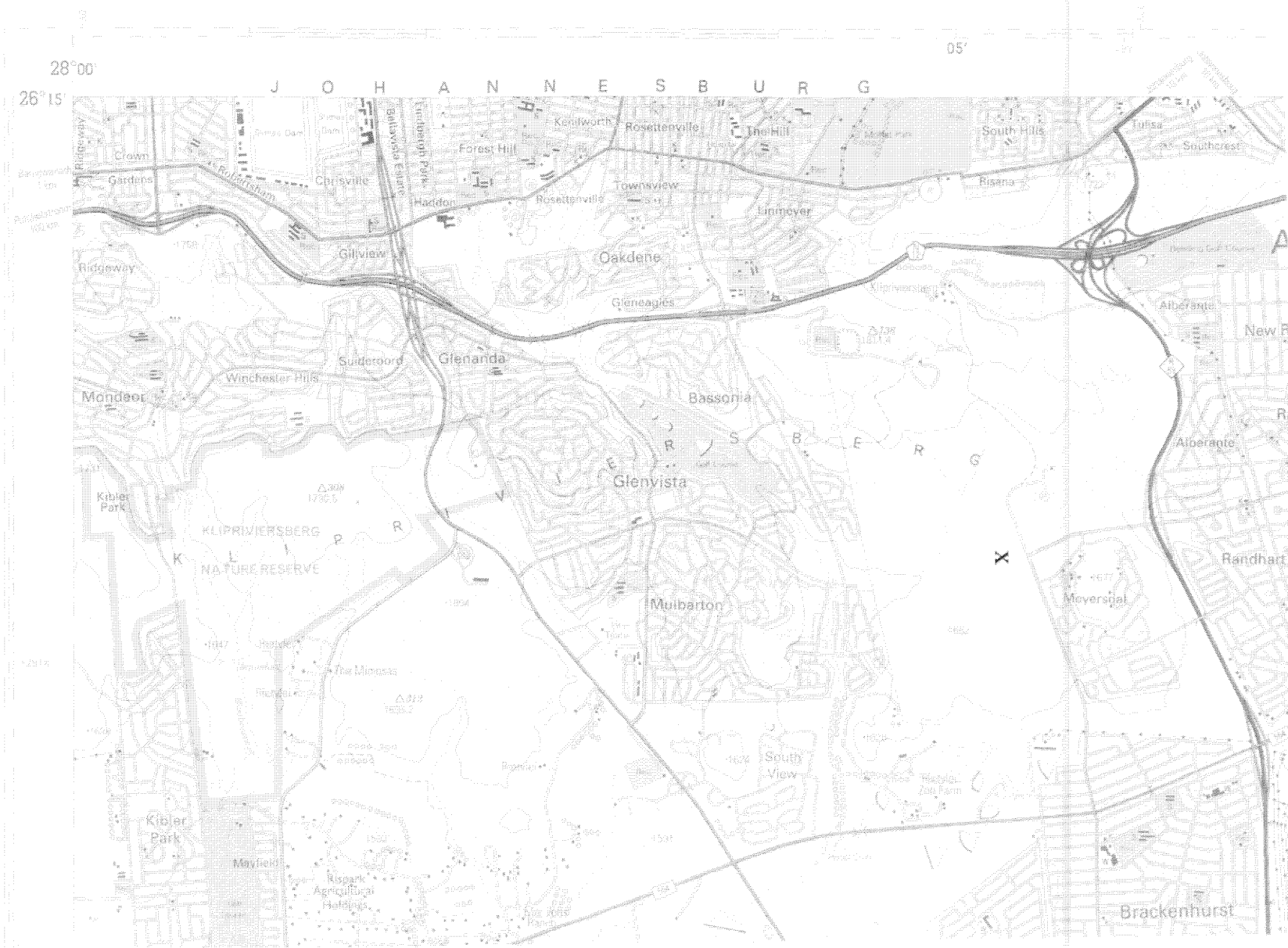


Figure 1. Location of the Michelle Avenue site on the 1:50 000 map 2628AC.

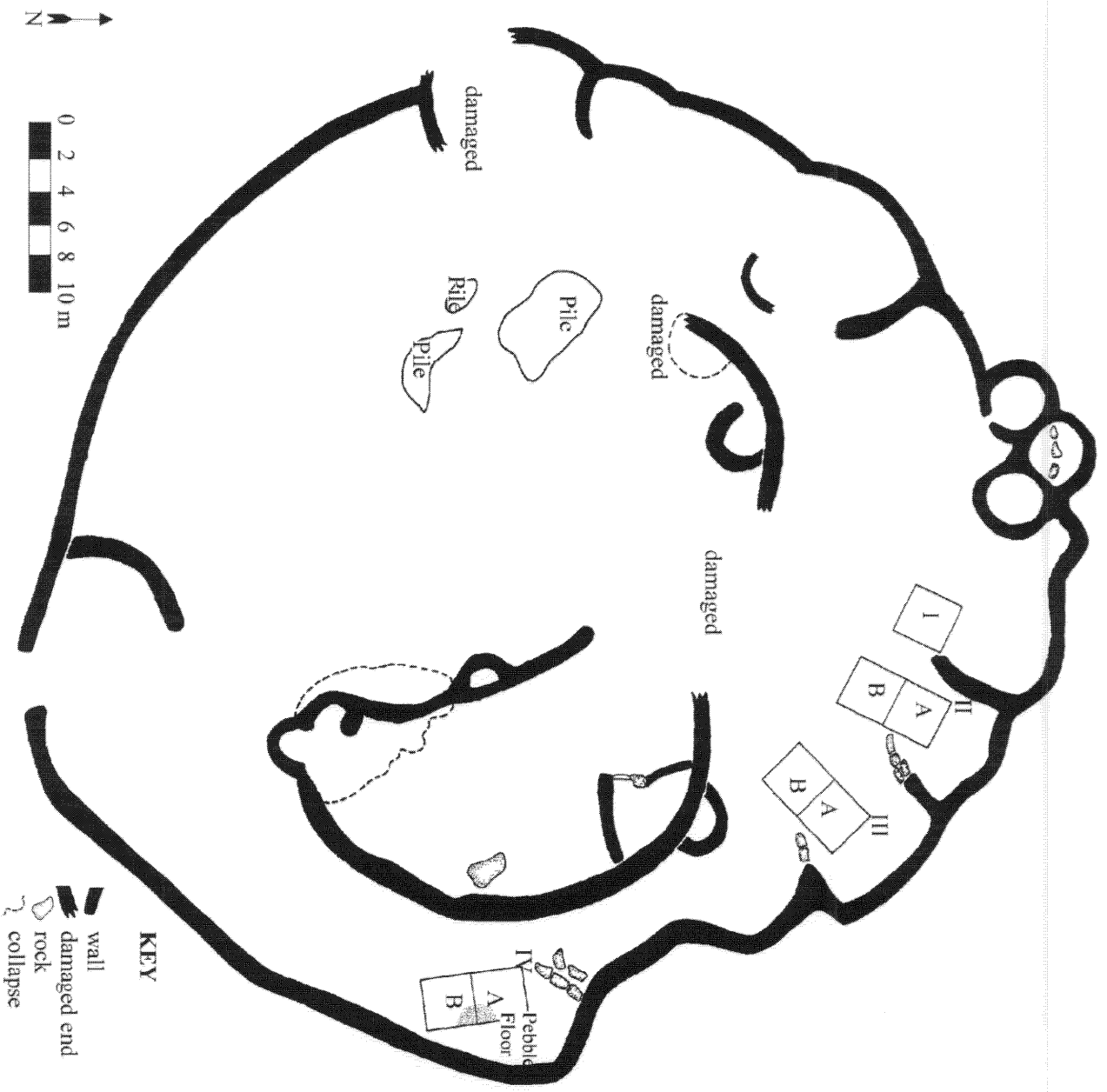


Figure 2. Plan of the Michelle Avenue site.

through the outer wall and piled up rubble in the central area. A few other walls higher up the slope also appear to have been damaged.

Despite the damage, the overall plan of the site could be recognised as an example of Group III walling. The central zone would have contained one or more cattle kraals. Small stock enclosures, on the other hand, were incorporated in the outer perimeter wall, near embayments marking the back courtyards of individual households.

EXCAVATIONS

Because the residential zone in the upper area was better preserved, students test excavated inside four embayments searching for hut remains. Squares were 3x3 m and excavated to bedrock or in 10 cm levels. In most cases once grass was removed, bedrock was close or protruding above the surface.

Trench I

Stoney brown soil 8-12 cm deep lay on top of bedrock (Figure 3). A few plain potsherds were recovered, but otherwise there were no finds or obvious signs of a structure.

Trench II A&B

The ground was rocky throughout, and the trench was abandoned after a few centimetres were removed.

Trench III A&B

Two to 10 cm of brown rocky soil lay on top of bedrock (Figure 4). A grooved stone sat on the surface in the middle of the trench. The striations and groove are characteristic of the base stone for a sliding door. No other evidence for a house was obvious, but the stone suggests a house had previously stood there.

Trench IV A&B

Being further downslope, this trench contained the deepest deposit (Figure 5). Some 2-4 cm of humus overlay 8-12 cm of brown soil on top of bedrock. Virtually the only stones



Figure 3. Trench I, Michelle Avenue site.



Figure 4. Trench III, Michelle Avenue site.



Figure 5. Trench IV, Michelle Avenue site.

in the second layer formed a semicircular paving at least 3 m wide (Figure 6). This paving was most likely the foundation of a sleeping hut.

These limited excavations show that the settlement was not burnt down. Furthermore, the dearth of artifacts shows that, when abandoned, the people took their possessions with them.

DISCUSSION

The Michelle Avenue site is one of many Late Iron Age settlements in the Klipriviersberg. Most belong to what archaeologists call Group III, dating to the *difaqane* / *myfecane*, and were occupied by a Sotho-Tswana people known as BaFokeng. To put these conclusions into context, it is necessary to consider some points about climate, material culture and historical events.

Climatically, Gauteng is not first-choice terrain for subsistence farmers. The area today is too cold and dry to grow sorghum and millet - the common crops (see Huffman 1996) - and there would have been little wood available for domestic use. From time to time, however, shifts in climate (Tyson & Lindsay 1992) made conditions more favourable. As a result, it was possible to cultivate domestic crops during parts of the Early (about AD 200 - 900) and Middle Iron Ages (ca AD 900-1300). But because better land was available elsewhere, Gauteng remained unattractive to farmers. Settled farming villages became common only in the late 15th and 16th centuries, once better areas were relatively more populated.

At this time Sotho/Tswana-speaking farmers moved into the Free State, establishing a capital around the hill Ntsuanasatsi. According to well-attested oral history (eg Legassick 1969), these people were BaFokeng. The Free State was generally tree-less, and so early BaFokeng used stone walls to demarcate homestead boundaries instead of wood and other organic materials.

Trench IV

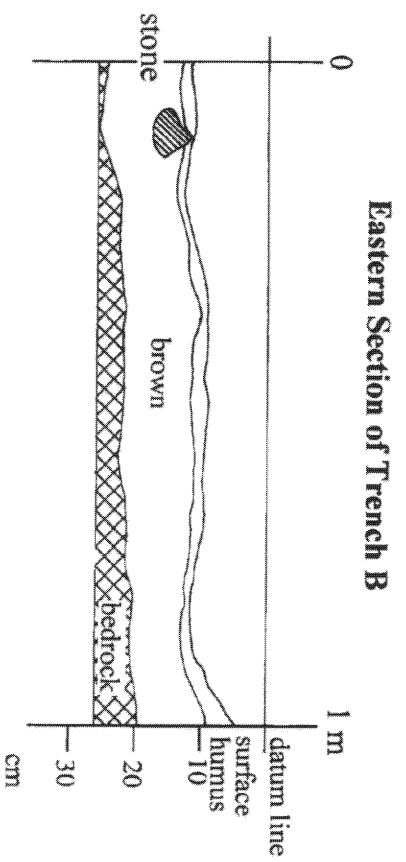
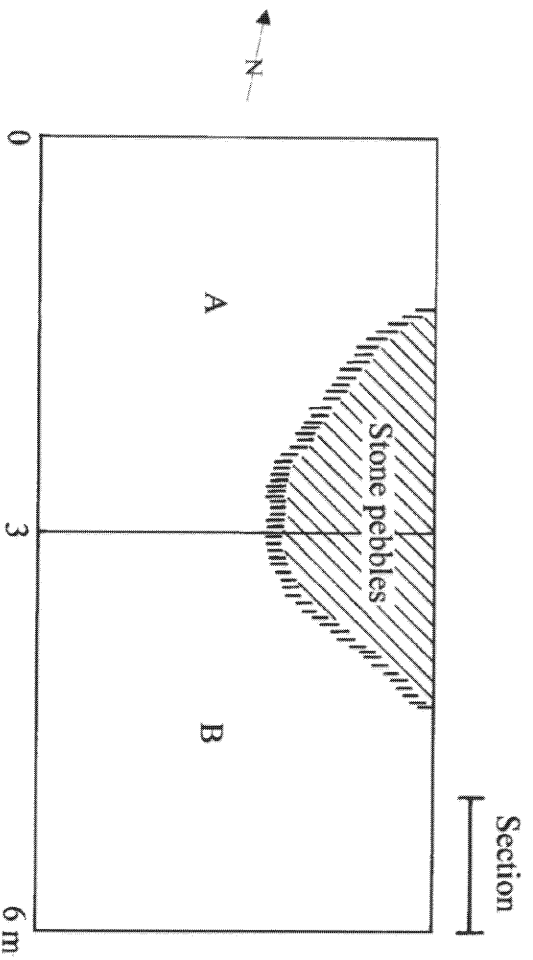


Figure 6. Plan and section of Trench IV, Michelle Avenue site.

This first walling is called Type N (after Ntsuanasatsi) in the Free State (Maggs 1976) and Group I (Taylor 1979) north across the Vaal. The layout of this walling is a variation of what archaeologists call the Central Cattle Pattern. The centre is the domain of men and contains the men's court and the cattle kraal (at Michelle Avenue this area was destroyed). An outer ring of houses forms the residential zone and the domain of women. This pattern was associated with Bantu-speaking people, such as Sotho/Tswana, who were patrilineal (tracing their blood from their fathers), had male hereditary leadership, believed that male ancestors played a role in daily life and practised *lobola* (bridewealth in cattle).

Group I stone walls reflecting this settlement organization are found with a specific style of pottery called Uitkomst, and this pottery is another material culture signature of BaFokeng. Group I sites with Uitkomst pottery are on record from hilly areas around Balfour in the east to the Vredefort Dome in the west. Several are known in the Klipriviersberg range. Most settlements were built at the base of hills, where stone was available, and near cultivatable soils. This proximity to cultivatable land was true for most Iron Age people: eventhough cattle were immensely important, settlements were located in terms of agricultural priorities. These Group I sites have been radiocarbon dated to between AD 1440 and 1665, a known warm and wet phase.

The Gauteng region was probably abandoned by farmers for about 100 years because the climate deteriorated, and then it was reoccupied in the late 18th century when the climate improved. By this time, Group I walling became somewhat more complex, and archaeologists call it Group III. The same Uitkomst pottery as before is associated with Group III sites (see Mason 1986:592), and this association shows that BaFokeng had returned to the area.

At the same time, another pottery style and walling type (Group II) occurs in the Suikerbosrand. These sites are associated with BaKwena, who belong to a Western Sotho/Tswana cluster.

In both the Suikerbosrand and Klipriviersberg, settlements were larger than before, and some were built on hilltops in defensive positions. The larger settlement size and hilltop location were defensive reactions to the troubled time known as the *difaqane/mfecane*. This period was marked by Nguni fighting Nguni, Nguni fighting Sotho/Tswana and Sotho/Tswana fighting Sotho/Tswana. New research (eg. Hamilton 1995) indicates that several interconnected factors led to this period of unprecedented military stress. These factors include the introduction of maize during a high rainfall period, the consequent population increase and competition for land, followed by a horrendous drought and agricultural collapse that led to even greater competition. In reaction, various Sotho/Tswana groups aggregated for their own protection, with BaKwena capitals such as Molokwane (Pistorius 1992) near Rustenberg swelling to several thousand people.

In the Klipriviersberg the largest concentration of people appears to have been around the new reservoir (Site 2628AC13), or slightly further north (see Mason 1986:559). Whatever the case, these settlements were controlled by relatively important people. Less important people, on the other hand, lived down below the hills in settlements such as the Michelle Avenue site.

All settlements in the Klipriviersberg and Suikerbosrand probably came to an end in about 1823 when Mzilikazi entered the area. As is well known, Mzilikazi left KwaZulu-Natal to escape Shaka's wrath. Mzilikazi settled first near Heidelberg before shifting to the present Pretoria area. It was his policy to bring his followers around the capital - including Sotho/Tswana who paid tribute - leaving the remaining land for grazing.

Many BaKwena settlements in the Suikerbosrand appear to have been burnt down, and many objects such as pottery and metal tools were left behind. This situation contrasts markedly with BaFokeng settlements in the Klipriviersberg, such as the Michelle Avenue site. Here virtually no objects were left, and the huts were not burnt. The significance of this difference remains unclear.

CONCLUSION

The Michelle Avenue site belongs to a cluster of 19th century BaFokeng settlements. Although little was found, the limited excavations will add to the broader picture as research advances.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Wendy Voorvelt prepared the illustrations, while Denise Voorvelt organized the catering. We are grateful to the Maintenance Department of the Alberton Town Council for clearing the grass. Alex Schoeman helped prepare the final report.

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