

PROGRESS REPORT MAY 2004 – MAY 2005

Prepared for South African Heritage Resources Agency
Archaeology, Palaeontology and Meteorite Unit

Permit No. 80/04/04/001/51 (excavation and collection at Schoemansdal)

Background to Research

The archaeological site of Schoemansdal is nestled at the foot of the Soutpansberg Mountains, 16 kilometres west of the modern town of Makhado in Limpopo Province. During the 19th century this village was the northern-most settlement of the Voortrekkers, migrants from the Cape Colony who had crossed the Orange and Vaal Rivers in the mid-1830s to settle Natal and the inland territories of southern Africa. Later inscribed as 'The Great Trek', the movement has been widely recounted as one of South Africa's 'central events' and archaeological work at Schoemansdal complements the rich legacies of historical research.

Located on the northern frontier of the Transvaal Republic, Schoemansdal's genesis lay in the commercial ambitions of the recalcitrant trek leader Hendrik Potgieter. Seeking independent access to the seaways, Potgieter and his followers founded Schoemansdal in 1848 at the nexus of the trans-Limpopo and Portuguese controlled east coast trade. Depicted as an original Trekker *maatskappy*, or company, which preserved the characteristics of patriarchal rule and lived high on the lucrative trade in ivory and slaves, the community, in fact, was riven by internal political conflicts and complicated demographically by indentured servants and the traffic of hunters, traders and adventurers. Lying more than 300 km from European neighbours, residents were also intricately connected with various regional (and conflicting) polities. In 1867 the strains inherent in these relationships led to renewed hostilities and Schoemansdal was abandoned by the European settlers on the 15th of July. For several decades the advancing tide of white colonialism was thus effectively halted. Significantly, the village area was never re-settled and, from an archaeological perspective, presents a unique research opportunity.

Fieldwork

As a result of numerous professional commitments, fieldwork at Schoemansdal has proceeded slowly over the previous 12 months. Two trips have been made, which have resulted in systematic pedestrian survey of the village. Although the site is extremely overgrown, the main community structures (the fort, church, parsonage and the house lot associated with the Potgieter family) have been re-located. These areas were excavated previously by teams from the University of Pretoria and by Sidney Miller and Warren Fish, under the auspices of the old Transvaal Provincial Museums Association. Concrete beacons, laid by Sidney Miller at 100 meter intervals across the site, are in-situ and have been used as the baseline for mapping the site. This is an on-going exercise. To date, the visible remnants of structures (Figure 1) have been successfully recorded as well as surface scatters of artefacts (Figure 2). (Regrettably, we are experiencing software interface problems and, currently, we are unable to print a copy of the map.)

New excavations, targeting areas outside the village centre, are planned for the last week in July and the first half of August. This work will be accomplished primarily through the annual fieldwork excursion hosted by the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of South Africa (UNISA) (Appendix 1).

This fieldwork will accomplish three main objectives:

1. A systematic surface collection (using a stratified sampling method that takes account of the documented village layout and houselot size) will be conducted across the entire village area. Such a collection has not been made previously (Sidney Miller pers.comm. 2005) and is deemed a worthwhile exercise for two reasons:
 - a) The density of artefacts across the site is generally low. Previous work at the site has failed to locate either household or community middens and a systematic collection will, therefore, increase the sample size for the village.
 - b) The site is toured regularly by museum visitors (which include large school groups) and is also used as a gathering place for community celebrations, particularly on 16 December. That the site is vulnerable to 'picking-over' by such 'day-trippers' is evinced by the virtual lack of 19th-century artefacts on the west side of the village, close to the Schoemansdal graveyard and the festival buildings. A surface collection across the site will prevent the further loss of artefacts.
- 2) Aside from the broadcast scatter material, there are a number of areas where material is 'puddled'. Sidney Miller (pers.comm. 2005) suggests that this material results from two actions: the filling of holes along roads by Schoemansdal residents and the dumping of rubbish in the water furrows built to supply the community's domestic needs. During the course of the UNISA field excursion, two or three of the clusters associated with water furrow dumping will be excavated.
- 3) Shovel test pits (STPs) will be conducted across a number of selected houselots. The STP results will be used to select areas for more intensive excavation. Warren Fish's work, conducted in the houselot associated with Potgieter, suggests that there is a diffuse scatter of artefacts in the backyards of houses. Such material can be more reliably associated with specific dwellings and will be an important complement to the items recovered through surface collection and water furrow sampling, as well as the artefacts recovered from previous excavations.

As a preamble to planned excavations, selected areas of the site will be cleared later this month. This exercise will allow for final selection of the areas to be targeted in July and August. The results of this work will be provided in the second SAHRA report, due on 1 June 2006.



Figure 1: Schoemansdal unidentified structure

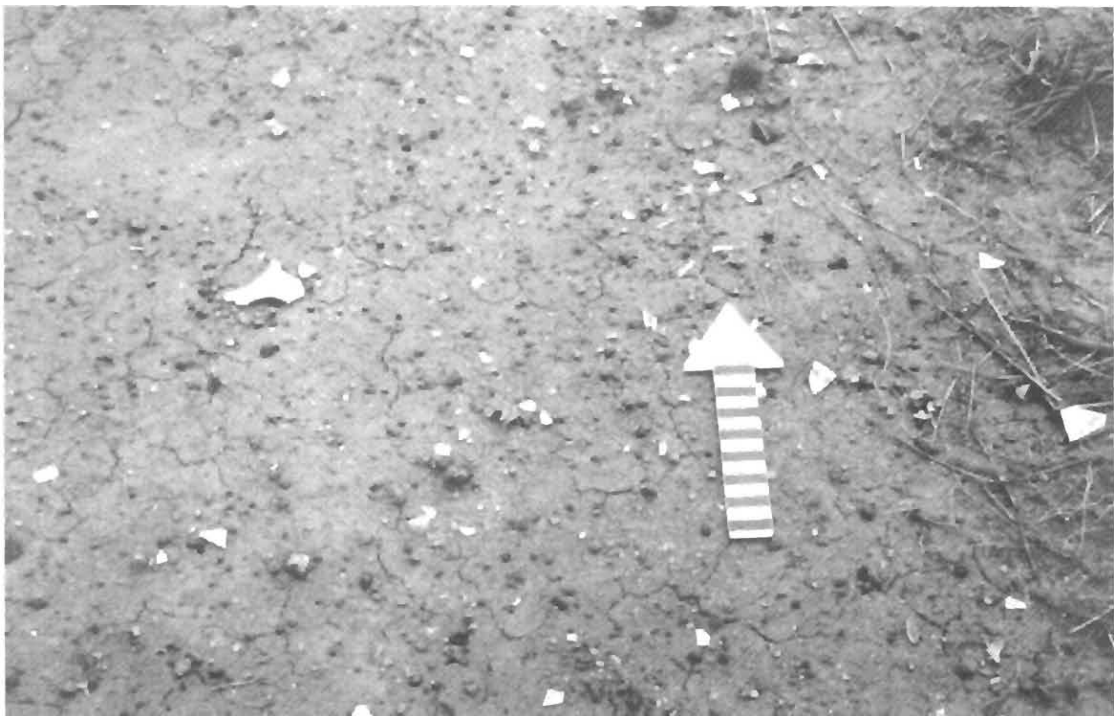


Figure 2: Schoemansdal surface scatter

Laboratory Work

A crucial component of the Schoemansdal archaeological project involves the analysis of materials recovered during previous excavations conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. With the exception of the fauna (Plug *et al* 2000), none of this material has been analysed. The ceramics are currently on loan from the Schoemansdal Museum and analysis is underway. Jane Klose and Antonia Malan of the Historical Archaeology Research Group (HARG), University of Cape Town, are assisting with this work. Three weeks in April were spent working in the HARG laboratory under the supervision of Dr Malan and Ms Klose.

Arrangements are being made to borrow the indigenous earthenware pottery, glass, beads, and miscellaneous artefacts from the Schoemansdal Museum store-room for analysis. The pottery and beads will be collected and brought to the UNISA laboratory later this month. The other artefacts will be collected in July.

Schedule

It is anticipated that all excavations will be completed in the second half of this year. The analysis of artefacts is proceeding apace and all laboratory work will be completed, or near completion, by the middle of 2006. Details will be provided in the progress report due 1 June 2006.

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References

Plug, Ina, Karen Scott and Warren Fish. 2000. Schoemansdal: Faunal remains from selected sites in an historic village. *Annals of the Transvaal Museum* 37:125-130.