

# **Archaeological excavations at Zimbali Estate**

**For Moreland Developments (Pty) Ltd. And Zimbali Estate**

**By**

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## Introduction

The Natal Museum Institute for Cultural Resource Management was approached by Moreland Developments to undertake a Phase 2 archaeological excavation in the area adjacent to the Zimbali Estates and the southeastern part of the property. These archaeological sites are to be assessed in terms of significance and if they require further mitigation. Three archaeological sites were previously identified as requiring further mitigation. Only one site, hereafter referred to as ZIM8, was excavated and fully mitigated, while no excavations were undertaken at the other two sites. This was a result of a change in the Terms of References during the course of the contract.

The initial Terms of Reference for this contract were to:

1. undertake test-pit excavations at three archaeological sites
2. assess these sites in terms of archaeological significance
3. submit a report regarding these findings

The archaeological sites were regarded as being significant since they each have a cultural deposit and diagnostic pottery dating to the Late Iron Age. The Late Iron Age has been underresearched in KwaZulu-Natal and any site that can yield valuable information regarding this time period is considered to be significant. The aim of the salvage excavation is thus to build a cultural-history of the specific area and broader region, in order to obtain an understanding of the settlement organisation.

The study area is located  $\pm 30$  km north of Durban and  $\pm 1$  km north from the Tongati River. The sites are located on the coastal dunes that are part of the Port Durnford Formation. The area has summer rainfall with an annual average of between 800 mm – 1000 mm per annum. Acocks (1975) has described the vegetation as Coastal Forest and Thornveld, although most of it is currently used for sugar cane farming.

The main excavated site is located on one of the tallest dunes in the area at a height of 82 m above sea level. The hill is in a key-hole shape: where the base of the hill is a flat area that borders the coast and the flood plains off the Tongati River.

The decorated ceramics at the site indicate that the site had at least two main occupations dating to the terminal Early Iron Age and the Late Iron Age. This roughly covers the period from AD 900 to AD 1400. The site was considered to be significant due to the high frequency of decorated ceramics observed on the surface.

### **Methodology and Stratigraphy**

I began the excavations in areas where artefacts were visible on the surface. Squares were extended as the excavations progressed, and in areas that appeared to have little disturbance, e.g. root activity as a result of dense

bushes. A total of fifteen 2 m x 2 m squares were excavated to varying depths.

ZIM8 was excavated in 10 cm spits when there was no visible stratigraphy. All squares were 2 m x 2 m, and varied between 50 cm to 80 cm in depth. Only one square extended to 1 m in depth. The upper 10 cm consisted of top soil and roots and was called Spit 1. Below this is a dark brown humic sand (Called DBHS) with rootlets extending from 11 cm to 40 cm below the surface. These are referred to as Spit 2 to Spit 4. Spits 2 - 4 have the highest density of artefacts. From Spit 5 to Spit 7 is a sterile Light Brown Sand (LBS) with few artefacts in it. It is in this layer where the Early Iron Age material is located. Two shell middens were recovered in the middle of the site and were excavated stratigraphically. These middens were at the base of the DBHS.

## FEATURES

Three main features were excavated from this site. These features included two shell middens and one ash feature.

The ash feature is located in Square 5, near the highest point of the hill. The ash feature is  $\pm 70$  cm below the current surface, and below the sterile LBS. The feature forms a pit that is 70 cm wide and 30 cm deep. Few artefacts were recovered from this pit, and it consisted mostly of a fine grey ashy soil with pieces of charcoal at the base. One upper grindstone and some ceramic fragments were recorded within this feature.

The first shell midden (called PM) is located 25 cm below the surface, and rests on the sterile hard red soil. PM is  $\pm 1$  m x 0.6 m in diameter and is 10 cm thick. The shell lens is a single lens of mostly unbroken shell, consisting mostly of brown mussels (*Perna perna*) and a few whelks and limpets. Several grinding stone fragments, faunal remains (from terrestrial and marine animals), and decorated ceramics were located in this midden.

The second shell midden (called MM1-4) is located  $\pm 45$  cm below the surface, and lies on a light brown sand. MM consists of four individual shell lenses lying above each other, and separated by brown and/or black sand. Each shell lens is  $\pm 5$  cm thick with a  $\pm 1 - 2$  cm sandy layer between each lens.

Each lens differed from the others in the following manner:

MM1. Very ashy with shell (lowest density of shell)

MM2. Ashy with gritty sand and shell (third highest density of shell)

MM3. Brown sand with shell (highest density of shell)

MM4. Very ashy-white soil with charcoal and some shell-probably remains of MM3 (second highest density of shell)

These individual lenses vary in size and position. That is they do not lie directly beneath each other, suggesting that there were several dumping episodes through time.

## ARTEFACTS

### Ceramics

The ceramics from the site are described below:

1. Decoration and Style
  - Double row of circular impressions on a small boss (LIA)
  - Flat lip and rim, double row of circular impressions (LIA)
  - Flat lip with circular impressions, and with straight rim and neck (LIA)
  - Flat lip with vertical incisions, straight rim (LIA)
  - Flat lip, everted rim, cross hatching at neck-shoulder (EIA)
  - Flat lip, everted rim, horizontal groove at base of rim (EIA)
  - Flat lip with vertical incisions, everted rim, straight neck (EIA)
  - Round lip, flat rim with external emphasis, straight neck (EIA)
  - Flat lip, rim and straight neck
  - Round lip with flat rim and straight neck
  - Flat lip, everted rim, straight neck
  - Beveled lip, flat rim
  - Tapered lip, flat rim and neck
  - Round lip, tapered rim, straight neck
2. Colour:
  - Red
  - Reddish-brown
  - Brown

- Black
3. Shape
- Unknown since vessels have not been reconstructed

### **Metal Working**

Several artefacts relating to metalworking were recovered. These include iron ore and slag. Most of these artefacts came from the center of the site, in the vicinity of Square 3/3A.

### **Bone:**

The bone from this site was not well preserved, and most of the fragments came from the shell middens. Several long bones (probably domesticated cattle) and fish bones were recovered from the middens and are well preserved. These have not yet been identified.

### **Shell:**

Most of the shell came from the two middens. *Perna perna* (brown mussel) and some *Ostridae* (oyster) dominate these middens. Other shell species occur, but in smaller frequencies.

## **Other**

Several fragments of daga were recovered. The fragments are concentrated around Squares 3 and 3A. These fragments appear to be granary floor remains as a few had a flat surface and pole impressions at the base.

Three fragments of smoking pipes were recovered from various places on the site. The pipes are undecorated and made from clay.

Several upper and lower grindstone fragments were recovered from various squares.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Ceramics**

The ceramics from this site belong to two distinct phases: Early Iron Age (EIA) and Late Iron Age (LIA). The EIA ceramics have decorations that are distinctive to the Ntshekane Phase of the EIA. This Phase has been dated to c. AD 900 to c. AD1050 from other sites in KwaZulu-Natal and represents the terminal Phase of the EIA.

The LIA ceramic sequence is not well known in KwaZulu-Natal. Apart from a few dated sites and an estimated sequence from Richards Bay, very little is known about this period. One of the main aims of the ZIM8 excavation was to



recover material that could be used to date the decorated ceramics. The shell middens and charcoal from the Ash Feature will enable future radiocarbon dating of this site.

The decorations on LIA pottery are distinct from the EIA decorations, and these decorated pieces from the site appear to be associated at least with the Moor Park Phase. The Moor Park ceramics date from *c.* AD 1250 to *c.* AD 1450, and thus ZIM8 probably dates to a similar period. It is possible that these ceramics will date to the earlier Blackburn Phase, *i.e.* *c.* AD 1050 to *c.* AD 1260. However, ceramic comparisons between these three sites (Blackburn, Moor Park and ZIM8) still need to be undertaken prior to any conclusion regarding ZIM8 LIA ceramics.

### **Settlement Organization at ZIM8**

There are two settlement occupations at this site. The smaller, or less dense, occupation belongs to the EIA (Ntshekane Phase), while the larger occupation belongs to the Moor Park Phase (LIA). Sites normally associated with the EIA tend to be large village settlements, however, the low density of ceramics, and proximity to Squares 2, suggests this is not the case at ZIM8. However, dense vegetation did make it difficult to extend the excavations over the entire hill.

The settlement for the LIA occupation appears to be concentrated near the top of the hill. The occupational debris is denser than the earlier occupation

and appears to occur over a wider area. The shell middens appear to be in the center of the site, as does the concentration of daga and iron ore fragments. This suggests a centralised area for refuse discard and/or human activity. Soils samples were taken for analyses but have not yet been analysed. This analysis may indicate whether the central area near the middens was a cattle pen.

## **CONCLUSION**

The excavations at ZIM8 formed part of a salvage excavation due to proposed development in the area. ZIM8 was initially assess as having medium archaeological significance, and test-pit excavations were undertaken to determine the full significance of the site. These excavations were indicated that more of the site should be excavated. A total of fifteen 2 m x 2 m squares were excavated to varying depths and yield valuable archaeological material.

Two shell middens, an Ash Pit and a centralised dumping area were located at the site. These features date to the Late Iron Age. Beneath the LIA horizon, an earlier occupation was excavated. This occupation dates to the terminal Early Iron Age.

The archaeological mitigation for the site ZIM8 is complete and the development may occur in this area of the site. However, the two other sites that were not excavated, still require mitigation.