

Excavation / recovery of skeletal remains

Farm Dwars River 372 KT
Richmond Road Project

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Report prepared by Frans Roodt (*BA Hons, MA Archaeology, Post Grad Dip in Museology. UP*)
For: Vhufa Hashu



45 Voortrekker Street, Polokwane, 0699

Cell: 0837702131 / 0833573669

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1. BACKGROUND

Locality: Richmond road on the farm Dwars Rivier 372 KT. 1:50 000 2430 CC

Coordinates: S24° 56' 54.6" E30° 06' 00.0".

On 1st July 2008 it was reported that human skeletal remains were exposed during earthworks for the construction of the new Richmond road. The author was requested by Anglo Platinum to verify the nature of the remains. All construction work by Hillary Construction, the contractor, had in the meantime been halted by Anglo Platinum and the affected area was cordoned off.

On the same day the discovery was investigated. From the preliminary investigation it was deduced that the site belonged to the Eiland archaeological facies dating to AD 1000 – 1300. The SAPS and nearby community members were present on site. During the discussions with the SAPS and community members it was explained why the remains were of an archaeological nature and those community members that were present and the SAPS agreed that they probably had no claim on the remains. The visible remains were recovered and left in the care of the Security Division of Hillary Construction.

On 10th July 2008 we obtained verbal permission from the Manager, SAHRA Archaeological and Palaeontological Unit, Mrs. Mary Leslie for the archaeological team to recover the skeletal remains. The team sifted out the soil dumps and loose soil in the area that still contained skeletal remains. The skeletal remains were again left in the care of Hillary Security.

2. LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS: The National Heritage Resources Act (Act no. 25 of 1999)

Subsection 36(6) Subject to the provision of any law, any person who in the course of development or any other activity discovers the location of a grave, the existence of which was previously unknown, must immediately cease such activity and report the discovery to the responsible heritage resources authority which must, in co-operation with the South African Police Service and in accordance with regulations of the responsible heritage resources authority-

- (a) carry out an investigation for the purpose of obtaining information on whether or not such grave is protected in terms of this Act or is of significance to any community; and
- (b) if such grave is protected or is of significance, assist any person who or community which is a direct descendant to make arrangements for the exhumation and re-interment of the content of such grave or, in the absence of such person or community, make any such arrangement as it deems fit.

3. RECOVERY METHOD

The recovery of the remains was a simple process. None of the original deposit was intact and all skeletal material had been disturbed from the original burial. The archaeological team recovered the bone material by brushing through the sand and sifting the loose soil to retrieve smaller bones. Some of the leftover soil appeared to be ashy in colour which may have been as a result of being mixed with decomposed animal dung indicating a cattle kraal.

The skeletal remains were then transported to Polokwane where Mrs Hester Roodt (BSc Hons Anatomy, UP) analysed the material.

4. RECOVERED REMAINS

From the analysis of the skeletal remains it was established that there were two individuals present. One skeleton was more complete and consisted of the cranium (skull and mandible), both humeri, radii and ulnae, os coxae, femora, tibiae and fibulae present, although some was damaged during excavation. Some hand and foot bones were also recovered. None of the vertebrae or ribs was retrieved. The second skeleton consisted only of two fragmented parietals, one right maxillary molar, the right half of the mandible, the left humerus (with no epiphyses present), and the distal part of the left tibia. Both were young adults and probably male, but the gender indicators are inconclusive.

5. DISCUSSION

Notwithstanding the severely disturbed nature of the archaeological site caused by the old Richmond road, the new road construction and a pipeline running along the eastern side of the old road, the area between the old road and the pipeline still contained diagnostic surface pottery fragments from the *Eiland* facies. The argument that the present-day community were not direct descendants from the archaeological community is based on the undermentioned:

- Associated pottery found some 30-40 meters from the burial site were of the *Eiland* facies of the Kalundu Tradition dating to AD 1000 – 1300.
- The ancestors of the present-day communities, whether of Sepedi or Bakone descent originally lived in stonewalled settlements; no such structures were observed in the affected area.
- During the historical period after Europeans occupied local farms, the residential mode changed to family based homesteads consisting of mud and stone built dwellings, including rectangular structures. Stonewalled terracing and enclosures remained prevalent. Cultural remains normally found at such settlements include industrial debris; amongst other things, fragments of cast-iron pots, tins and other metal, glass and porcelain. No remains indicating the historical occupation of the immediate area were observed.
- Burial sites are normally not found in isolation. They occur within or in the immediate vicinity of a settlement. In this particular case it is deduced that the settlement concerned here is the *Eiland* archaeological site mention above.

6. CONCLUSION

The burial site was completely disturbed. None of the burial remains or any cultural material was found in the context of an archaeological deposit. However, *Eiland* facies ceramics were noted in the vicinity of the burial site. In the discussion above it is argued that because of a lack of any material evidence to the contrary, the recovered human remains date to the

period AD 1000 - 1300 and belong to the *Eiland* facies of the Early Iron Age Kalundu Tradition. The Pedi people originated in the Brits/Pretoria area and moved to Sekhukhune land in the mid-17th century, while Bakone people originated in northern KwaZulu-Natal and migrated as a separate group into the region prior to the Pedi occupation.

7. POSTSCRIPT

When it became known that the local communities were contesting the archaeological findings and now claim the remains as ancestral to them, the author went back to the site in an attempt to find additional evidence to verify the original conclusion. The immediate area had unfortunately deteriorated even more because of the upgrading of the pipeline and the addition of a road within the fenced area (see figure 7). After an intensive surface search no pottery fragments or any other cultural material was found.

8. REFERENCES

Huffman, T.N. 2007. *Handbook to the Iron Age. The archaeology of Pre-colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa.* University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Roodt, H. 2008. Analysis of Skeletal Material. Farm Dwars River 372 KT. Richmond Road Project. Unpublished report.



Figure 1. General view of the road construction area.



Figure 2. View of the area where the skeletal remains was found indicated by arrow.



Figure 3. Position of skeletal material indicated by surgical gloves.



Figure 4. Smaller fragments of bone.



Figure 5. View of the skull.



Figure 6. View of the mandible.



Figure 7. View of area to the east of the original burial site between the road and the pipeline where pottery was found in 2008. Image taken in September 2014 in a northerly direction.