

**TEST EXCAVATIONS AT THE MARITZ LAAGER,  
BLINKPOORT, HEIDELBERG DISTRICT, GAUTENG**

A Phase -2 report submitted to A.Doucakis

Professor TN Huffman

Ms MH Schoeman

Mr MT Murimbika

Archaeological Resources Management

Archaeology Department

University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In November 1837 Gert Maritz established a laager next to the Suikerbosrandrivier so that he could join the second punitive expedition against Mzilikazi. Approximately 200 men on horseback took part, leaving some 500 people and 40 wagons behind. Because of illness, Maritz himself did not participate (Meintjes 1973).

Maritz was originally on his way to Natal. So when the expedition was over, he continued trekking east. The laager was therefore occupied for less than five weeks, from about 4 November to about 10 December 1837.

Recently, Mr A Doucakis became interested in the laager, and through substantial archival research identified its location (26.34.52S 28.30.04E) on the present farm Blinkpoort 396 IR (Figure 1). Evidently, wagons in two nested ovals formed the laager, while stone and soil embankments blocked the gaps. Significantly, aerial photographs from the 1940s show a double oval formation, unlike any Late Iron Age stone walled structure in the region. Calculations based on these photographs indicate that the outer oval was about 50m x 28m (Figure 2). Thus, 28 wagons in the outer ring could have surrounded 12 on the inside.

Unfortunately, farming activities have obliterated this formation, and nothing remains on the surface. A large pile of stones nearby is the result of this and other land clearance (Figure 3). The pile, incidentally, incorporated Earlier (ca 1 000 000 to 200 000 years ago) and Middle (ca 200 000 to 25 000 years ago) Stone Age material.

Even though the identification is secure, Mr Doucakis wanted the laager site excavated to provide further confirmation. He commissioned Archaeological Resources Management (ARM) for this purpose.

ARM's task was to establish whether any evidence for the oval formation remained and whether a Late Iron Age (LIA) stone-walled settlement had predated the laager.

## **EXCAVATIONS**

### **Method**

In February, 2000 a land surveyor located the oval formations on the ground and placed a peg near the centre of the inner ring. In October a second surveyor placed the centre peg 11m to the east. Thus, a reasonable estimate of tolerance for the location of the embankment formation is 10m.

ARM staff examined the entire surface of the laager on 8 July and then test excavated the site on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2000 (SAHRA Permit No 80/00/07/009/51). Four helpers were supplied by Mr Doucakis.

A datum line was established through the short, east/west axis of the laager (Tr I) and incorporated the first surveyor's peg. Another line at right angles (Tr II) also incorporated the peg (Figure 2). A series of 1 x 2m squares were excavated along the two lines at the estimated locations, within the limits of tolerance, of the southern embankments (Figure 4).

### **Stratigraphy**

Generally, a brown humus plough zone 7 to 18cm thick lay on top of red brown soil covering a bed rock of laminated shale (Figure 5). In Tr I bedrock rose closer to the surface in the eastern trenches (Figure 6):

	<b>Tr I/A</b>	<b>I/C</b>	<b>I/J</b>	<b>I/L</b>	<b>I/O</b>
<b>plough zone</b>	0-7	0-14	0-5	0-5	0-10
<b>red brown</b>	7-20	14-25	-	5-9	10-18
<b>bed rock</b>	20	25	5	9	18

In I/P bedrock protruded above the surface, while in Tr II it lay immediately under the surface (Figure 7).

## **Finds**

All trenches were devoid of Historic material. A few Middle Stone Age (MSA) artefacts, however, occurred in the soil above bedrock throughout Trench 1. In addition a large quartzite block (10x20x16cm) occurred in I/C.

	<b>Tr I/C</b>	<b>I/J</b>	<b>I/L</b>	<b>I/N</b>	<b>I/O</b>
<b><u>MSA artefacts</u></b>					
<b>quartzite</b>	1	2	3	3	6
<b>quartz</b>	-	-	-	1	-

MSA flakes and other artefacts also occurred in the ploughed fields surrounding the laager site. A few other quartzite artefacts date to the Earlier Stone Age. The quartzite itself occurs as river cobbles in the fields and the nearby river. The stone probably derives from the quartzite hills a short distance to the east.

## **DISCUSSION**

The documentary evidence shows that the Maritz party laagered on the present farm Blinkpoort. Furthermore, the oval formations visible in the 1940s photographs make sense as embankments around the wagons. Boer walling elsewhere, it should be noted, satisfied immediate needs and was therefore relatively simple. Thus, if one considers the stony ground and short occupation, it is unlikely that the Maritz party would have dug moats or foundation trenches. Instead, the embankments would have been hastily constructed on the surface.

The excavations did not reveal the remains of embankments. Some squares went through the probable locations based on the second surveyor's calculations as well as the first estimate. Presumably, agricultural activities since the photographs were taken have removed all traces.

The lack of Historic artefacts is also explicable. Every possession was precious to the voortrekkers, and even broken items would have been recycled. Attitudes may have

changed once they reached their new home, but while on trek they would not willingly discard any manufactured item.

The Maritz party probably placed the laager on stony ground for good drainage because they were there during the rainy season. Similar reasons may have made this area attractive during Middle Stone Age times.

The excavations and surface examination answer another question concerning previous inhabitants. The characteristic stone foundations, huts, grainbins, middens and cattle kraals of Late Iron Age settlements do not exist at the laager. Although there are some Late Iron Age settlements about 500m to the northeast, none were built on the stony rise where the laager later stood.

At one stage of the archival research, the question arose whether there was any relationship between the laager and Late Iron Age settlements. Stone-walled settlements in the hills nearby all belong to Group I/Type N (eg. Huffman 1988, Maggs 1976, Taylor 1979) and were occupied by Sotho/Tswana-speaking people between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Later stone-walled settlements do not exist here; and so, this land was empty when the voortrekkers arrived.

The hills around Heidelberg, on the other hand, were occupied by Sotho/Tswana until Mzilikazi took it in about 1832 (Rasmussen 1975). Although Mzilikazi moved to Pretoria and then Zeerust, he may have still had claims on the land. Such claims precipitated the attack on voortrekkers when they crossed the Vaal in 1836 and the subsequent battle of Vegkop. The Maritz laager was thus the result of complicated human interaction at the beginning of the Historic period north of the Vaal.

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