

Proposal/Description

Application for an Excavation Permit for Site 2328CB1 on the Farm Kirstenbos 497 LR near Marken, Limpopo Province

Expanded Motivation

Site context and background information

Site 2328CB1 is a small hill complex located on the farm Kirstenbos 497 LR, about 7 km south of Marken in the Waterberg District Municipality of Limpopo Province. The site's coordinates are: 23.651723° S; 28.404785° E.

The site was first identified by the late Jan Aukema, curator of Unisa's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, during a survey of the Lephalala Drainage Basin in March 1988. Eiland ceramics from 2328CB1 were illustrated in his seminal article on the archaeological signature of African farmer rainmaking sites in the Waterberg dating back a thousand years ago (Aukema 1989: 71).

Small-scale test excavations were subsequently conducted in 1996 during an annual Unisa field school in terms of a research permit (No. 8/96/04/005/51) issued to M.M. Küsel. These excavations yielded four linked radiocarbon (charcoal) dates from a terrace 'midden' (Excavation 1.4, Square D1) associated with Eiland ceramics:

Pta-7261	710 ± 45 BP	Layer 3: 10–15 cm
Pta-7266	650 ± 30 BP	Layer 6: 25–30 cm
Pta-7265	760 ± 30 BP	Layer 8: 35–40 cm
Pta-7264	720 ± 35 BP	Layer 10: 45–50 cm

Two additional radiocarbon dates were obtained from test pits in an ashy midden-like deposit close to a small overhang containing grinding hollows and cupules located on top of the hill:

Excavation 1.2 (charcoal):

Pta-5868	800 ± 40 BP	Layer 1: 0-10 cm
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Excavation 1.3 (collagen extracted from bone):

Pta-5876	320 ± 40 BP	Layer 1: 5-10 cm
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Whilst the bulk of the excavated and surficial ceramics belong to the Middle Iron Age *Eiland facies*, a small number of Late Iron Age Moloko ceramics (*Madikwe facies*), but some with dragged punctates (*Letsibogo facies*) have also been recovered. The excavations also yielded glass and ostrich eggshell beads, as well as a substantial faunal collection. A provisional faunal catalogue was prepared by Drienie Beukes (2000) of the Department of Archaeozoology of the then Transvaal Museum.

Curation of the Kirstenbos Collection and Site Mapping

All the material from Kirstenbos was repackaged and curated in 2014. This formed part of a new initiative of Unisa's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, which entails the reorganisation and systematic curation of all its archaeological collections. We also employed a professional survey company, R Nel Surveys cc, in 2013 to survey the Kirstenbos hill complex and map the associated archaeological occurrences. The survey map is currently being refined in collaboration with Habitat Landscape Architects.

Aims of the Proposed 2015 Excavations

Site 2328CB1 is generally assumed to be a rainmaking hill frequented mainly by Middle Iron Age ritual specialists linked to communities producing ceramics belonging to the *Eiland facies* (Aukema 1989; Van der Ryst 1998; Huffman 2009). It is noteworthy that the majority of the Kirstenbos radiocarbon dates cluster around AD 1300, i.e. at the inception of the Little Ice Age, a climatic period marked by increasing and multiple droughts (Huffman 2012).

Kirstenbos displays most of the features associated with African farmer rainmaking sites (see Schoeman 2006; Huffman 2012):

- it is a steep-sided hill with difficult access;
- no stock enclosures have as yet been identified;
- cupules, grinding hollows, grindstones and burnt clay (dagha) pieces point to possible ritual activities;
- the excavated faunal remains include species associated with rain control in farmer ideology;
- faint hunter-gatherer rock paintings in shallow shelters against the hill-slope, combined with surface finds of stone tools, point to an earlier, contemporary or later hunter-gatherer presence.

It has been argued that rain-control hills should have no clear evidence for permanent settlement, such as house floors, but could contain the burnt clay remains of temporary grain bins used during ritual ceremonies. During the 1996 investigation, a test excavation probed an area associated with burnt dagha pieces and grinding hollows. No definitive structure was uncovered. Since the results were inconclusive, we aim to test additional habitable areas strewn with dagha pieces, several of which were identified during site visits in 2013 and 2014. Confirmation is needed whether the burnt clay pieces are indeed the remains of temporary grain bins used in rainmaking rituals or perhaps derive from domestic structures associated with a marginalised farming (Eiland) community. Stratigraphically and contextually intact data from activity areas are furthermore required to establish a more detailed chronology for the utilisation and / or occupation of the hill. The material uncovered during the 1996 terrace excavation had mostly washed down from higher upslope, which complicated a reconstruction of the occupational sequence. The proposed excavations are aimed at addressing and resolving these issues.

Excavation Team

The excavations will be directed and supervised by Prof. J.C.A. Boeyens, Dr M.M. van der Ryst and Mr F.P. Coetzee. We will be assisted by a team of postgraduate (Honours and Master's) Archaeology students from Unisa. All the excavated material will be housed in Unisa's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology of which Francois Coetzee is the curator. Permission to excavate has been granted by the Kirstenbos landowners, Buks and Magda van der Walt.

References

Aukema, J. 1989. Rain-making: a thousand year-old ritual? *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 44(150): 70–72.

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