

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION IN THE MASEBE NATURE RESERVE, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

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The Waterberg is an area covered in savannah vegetation and is characterised by layered sandstone hills, some volcanic intrusions and mountains (De Klerk 2003: 27). The region is rich in cultural history and archaeology stretching back to the Early Stone Age. Makapansgat, which lies 40 km to the south-east of the Waterberg, provides evidence of early human ancestors (Taylor *et al.* 2003: 36), while Stone Age sites are found at Goudwater and rock art and Iron Age (IA) sites at Goudrivier, the Lapalala Wilderness and the Masebe Nature Reserve (Taylor *et al.* 2003: 36–38).

Masebe Nature Reserve is situated in the south-west of Limpopo Province (Boonzaaier 2012: 3). Thabanya Kgosi, which means 'Mountain of the Chief' in Northern Sotho, is the name the local community gave to the small hill found in the reserve on which an IA site is located. The site is covered by stone walls, terraces, grinding stones and shards. An archaeological investigation was carried out at the site as part of an Honours project at the University of Pretoria. The project was funded by a Kent Bequest grant of the SA Archaeological Society.

The aim of the project was to construct a settlement chronology of the site from the archaeology found at the site in combination with oral histories, historic reports and other published work. As part of this the stone walls were surveyed and mapped, and the ceramics found on the terraces was recorded. The information gathered will contribute to the larger body of knowledge on the movement of people through the Waterberg, with specific focus on how this fits into the wider settlement phases as identified by Aukema (1989) and Loubser (1981).

Occupation of the Waterberg

Two occupational models exist to explain the settlement of people in the Waterberg. In 1989 Aukema identified three phases of occupation (Aukema 1989; Boeyens & Küsel 1992: 3). The first is characterised by ceramics of the Eiland tradition with rim notching, hatched chevrons, arcades and herringbone, which dates to AD 1000–1300. The second phase is represented by undecorated ceramics. Such shards are found at stone-wall sites that were generally occupied by the Northern Ndebele residing on the top of the Waterberg between the 16th and 17th centuries. The third and last phase contains Moloko type ceramics of the Sotho-Tswana from the 18th and early 19th cen-

turies. These Moloko ceramics are decorated with multi-chrome, red and black decoration (Huffman 2007: 183–207).

The second occupational model is given by Loubser in his master's thesis. He identified three discrete groups of stone-wall sites in the Polokwane area and identified three ceramic styles found at these settlements. His first group of walling, Group I, is characterised by sites that are situated on the peaks of hills and that comprise multiple broken walls forming terraces that surround an area of relatively large circular stone inclusions in the centre (Loubser 1989: 21). Group I sites correlate to Aukema's Eiland-type ceramics phase (Loubser 1981: 156). Group II sites are located at the bases of hills or on a gradual rises within valleys and generally face north. They have an outer wall around a passage that leads to a central enclosure that is surrounded by smaller walls (Loubser 1981: 21). The walls are constructed mainly of quartzite blocks and consist of neatly packed double stone walls filled with debris (Loubser 1981: 21–22). Group II sites are associated with Aukema's Moloko ceramics phase dating to the mid-17th century AD (Loubser 1981: 157–158). Each site comprises a number of orderly arranged stone-circle units (Loubser 1981: 21). The last group of walling, Group III, is a collapsed version of Group II. Villages are also situated at the bases of hills or on gradual rises between valleys (Loubser 1981: 22). Letaba ceramics dating from AD 1600 to 1840 are characteristic of Group III sites (Loubser 1981: 22).

The southern and northern Transvaal Ndebele

Through the use of initiation cycles, genealogies and recorded histories by Jackson (1982) and Van Warmelo (1930) it is possible to determine that the Ndebele migrated from Natal to the central and northern regions of South-Africa between 1630 and 1670 before the Zulu Kingdom rose to power (Huffman 2004: 95; Skohosana 2009: 20, 24–25). The changing and dry climatic conditions of the 1700 AD was also part of the reason for the migration (Huffman 2004: 96; Tyson *et al.* 2000: 129–133). The Ndebele split into the northern Transvaal and southern Transvaal Ndebele, and then divided into smaller groups (Skohosana 2009: 20). Both the Southern and Northern Transvaal Ndebele moved through and settled in parts of the Waterberg. The southern Transvaal Ndebele who claim Musi as their legendary chief are divided into two main groups: the Ndzundza and the Manala (Delius 1989). This divide is a result of a struggle for leadership between Musi's six sons (Delius 1989). Manala moved to Walmannsthal while

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Nzundza and his brother Mthombeni moved east to KwaSimkhulu, near Belfast (Skhosana 2009: 25). Mthombeni then broke away from his brother to settle at Zebediela near Mokopane where he established himself as the Kekana chief (Skhosana 2009: 25). The Ndzunzda settlements found in the Waterberg region are usually on the top of the hills and follow the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP) with beehive huts and stone walling for defensive purposes. An example is the settlement at Melora Hill in the Lephalala Basin to the west of the Waterberg (Huffman 2007: 448). Moor Park ceramics were found on Melora Hill and are characterised by punctates, rim notching, appliqué and a single horizontal line of jabs (Huffman 2007: 161).

The Northern Transvaal Ndebele meanwhile, encompasses the Langa Ndebele who claim their descent from Hlubi (Jackson 1982: 3; Skhosana 2009: 26). The Langa Ndebele migrated from eNgungunglovu (Pietermaritzburg) through Swaziland (Jackson 1982: 3). In 1836 by which time the Langa Ndebele had migrated and settled in the Waterberg, Mankopane claimed his rightful place as their chief (Jackson 1982: 11). They built stone walls on the lower slopes of hills and followed a variation of the CCP (Huffman 2004: 97, Jackson 1982: 11). In September of 1854 the Kekana Ndebele of Mokopane and the Langa Ndebele of Mankopane murdered Hermanus Potgieter and 27 other Voortrekkers at Moorddrif and Fothane Hill (Jackson 1982: 14). After the attack, Mankopane and his people retreated to the area of the current Masebe Nature Reserve. While the chief stayed at Thabana ya Kgosi, his people were located on the Magagamatala hill to the south (Boonzaaier), where they were attacked by the Boers in 1858 (Jackson 1982: 16). However, Mankopane escaped the attack and fled to Thutlwane Hill (Jackson 1982: 18). It is evident from both the archaeology and oral history that there has been a relatively long history of occupation by various cultural groups in the Waterberg and Masebe in particular. It is this history of occupation which this project seeks to enhance through a study of the site of Thabana ya Kgosi.

Stone walls and terraces

To fully understand the research area, three field trips were undertaken as part of the project during 2013. A foot survey of the area helped to identify the stone-wall features and ceramic types on the surface of the site. Multiple stone walls and rough terraces were found spread around the foot of the hill next to Thabana ya Kgosi, particularly on the north-facing side. Eighteen semi-circular broken and discontinuous walls were documented, with the walls forming seven rough terraces on the upper part of the site. The stone walls that form the boundary of terraces are low and collapsed (Fig. 1). The stones used to build the walls are of unequal size and appear to have been stacked on each other in no particular order or form.

The builders of Eiland settlements seem to have incorporated the walls into the natural landscape of the site, with equal-size granite blocks or a single line of overturned boulders being used (Loubser 1981:21). This is also the case at Masebe where various walls, especially on the upper terraces, were built by combining the boulders of the natural environment.



Fig.1: Terrace on upper part of the site and stone wall

Undecorated and decorated shards and other archaeological material remains such as grinding stones were found on the site. They were distributed across the site but appeared to be concentrated more on the upper terraces. A total of 631 shards were identified and of these several IA decoration types were identified, including pottery of the Eiland, the Moloko, the Moor Park and a historical facies (Fig. 2).

The earliest ceramic tradition found on site is of the Eiland facies as identified by Huffman (2007). A total of 22 diagnostic Eiland shards associated with Group I walling of Loubser (1989:21) were found scattered on the surface. Both Aukema and Loubser identify Eiland pottery as the first ceramic phase in the Waterberg. Their models do not, however, explain what type of ceramics replaced the Eiland ceramics directly around AD 1300. Both the undecorated and the Moloko-type shards found at Masebe could thus reflect this change, as has been argued by Van der Ryst (1998: 44). Undecorated shards occur on all terraces and, in fact, 576 of the 631 shards found were undecorated and 13 were of the Moloko type.

It is well known that Moloko-type ceramics were made by Sotho-Tswana-speaking people from around 1350 and replaced the Eiland ceramics in the Limpopo Province and in Botswana (Boeyens 2003: 64; Huffman 2007: 183-207; Loubser 1981: 82). This takeover indicates the movements of Sotho-Tswana people into South Africa during the second millennium

(Boeyens 2003: 64). Van der Ryst (1998: 38) further states that the presence of undecorated shards in the Waterberg is consistent with a more recent occupation of the area by Sotho-Tswana or Northern Ndebele groups. It is therefore possible that undecorated and Moloko-type ceramics found on the site indicate contact between the Sotho-Tswana and northern Ndebele who migrated to the Waterberg. Through Langa Ndebele history, for example, it is known that they intermingled with Sotho-Tswana speakers and that various Sotho-Tswana groups were incorporated into the Langa Ndebele tribe (Jackson 1982: 9). As an integrated group, both ceramic styles would be expected to feature at the same time in the archaeological record and it thus appears that Sotho-Tswana and Langa Ndebele might have occupied the site at the same time.

Moor Park shards found on site were also probably made by the Langa Ndebele. Aspects of the settlement also suggest a layout similar to the Moor Park style, since the settlement is built on hilltop in a defensive position (Huffman 2007: 33). The layout was probably in response to high levels of conflict in the 19th century both between indigenous peoples themselves and with white settlers.

The last ceramic facies found on the site consists of a historical-type ceramic. No date can be given for these shards, but it is suggested that they are indicative of a more recent occupational phase of the site since the shards are decorated with a single band of hatching or arcades. According to Loubser (1981: 22), Group III sites were inhabited by Shangaan and Ndebele people. The historical ceramics found on the site are believed to have been deposited after Mankopane fled to Thultwana Hill in 1854 (Loubser 1981: 18). Following the rinderpest epidemic in the 1890s, Tsonga and Shangaan people migrated into the Makapan Valley (Esterhuysen 2005: 6) and may therefore be responsible for this ceramic phase.

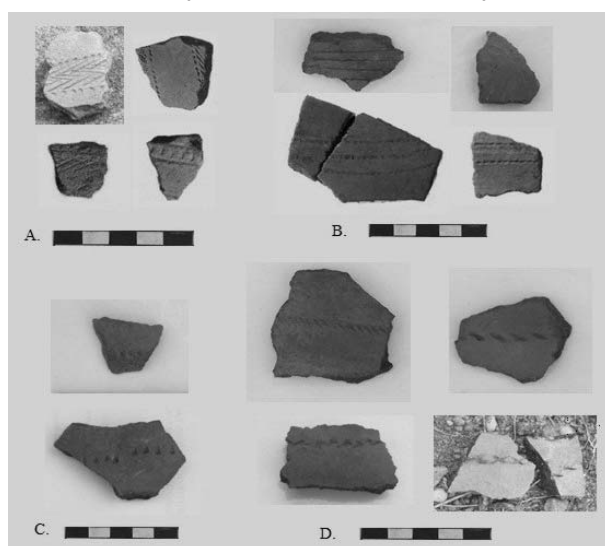


Fig. 2: Ceramics found on site. A – Eiland; B – Moloko; C – Moor Park; D – Historical.

Conclusion

The information gathered as part of this project will contribute to the larger body of literature that focuses on the multiple phases of occupation and reoccupation of the Waterberg from the Early Iron Age onwards. The site in the Masebe Nature Reserve is a direct reflection of the changing landscape of the Waterberg as different groups moved through or settled in the area. It clearly shows how during numerous periods of occupation and reoccupation each group adapted the site to its own needs and produced its own distinctive ceramics.

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