

NOTES

DUTCH BRASS BUTTONS FROM THE CAPE TO THE MARICO

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Brass trinkets and small goods made of other metals were much in demand as items of barter in the Cape for several centuries after the first European colonisation. In an account published in the late eighteenth century Mentzel commented on the worth of such goods, the relative economic advantage that this trade represented to the colonists, and the utilitarian modification of some of the traded items by the indigenees.

The whole agreement made by Van Riebeeck with the Hottentots that he found dwelling there rests upon the acceptance by the natives of presents at a total cost of about f1,000. One can realise what an extraordinary number of beads, cheap knives, small looking-glasses, and similar rubbishy "penny" articles can be obtained for f1,000. They valued highly small pieces of iron, whereof they made the points of their assagais, and the brass buttons that were soldered together by girdlers out of two small plates of metal are even now more acceptable to them than the cast article. For if the former were put in the fire the solder would melt and the two plates would separate and provide two pieces of brass (Mentzel 1785:49-50).

Excavations at the slave lodge on the Dutch estate of Vergelegen have produced several examples of these brass buttons, in a variety of sizes. Some of them are intact, while others have separated accidentally, or have been separated deliberately, into two parts (Fig. 1). The lower part incorporates a metal eye for sewing the button to a garment, while the upper part becomes a loose hollow brass dome. These buttons found in the remains of the eighteenth century slave lodge provide a satisfying corroboration of Mentzel's descriptions of their occurrence at the Cape. But they also provide a clue to the identity of a class of artefact found distributed from the Cape to the Transvaal.

Two hollow, domed brass artefacts were recovered recently by Mr Jan Boeyens (UNISA) from two late Iron Age sites in the Marico district. One came from a depth of 30 to 40 cm in a midden on site 2526 AC2 on Kleinfontein or Olifantspruit (with dates for the site ranging from 180 to 200 BP), and the other from a hut



Fig. 1. Four brass buttons from Vergelegen slave lodge, one of them disassembled to show the hollow upper dome (scale in mm).



Fig. 2. Domed brass ornament from Kleinfontein in the Marico district (scale in mm).

floor on site 2526 CB9 Magozastad 248 JP (with dates ranging from 400 to 210 BP) (J. Boeyens pers. comm.). They are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. They are of two different sizes, and both have two holes punched through opposite sides of their rims, presumably for attachment to a garment or for suspension. The diameters, about 16 mm and about 10 mm respectively, correlate with the sizes of the domes of the Vergelegen buttons and the curvatures are the same. We are confident in identifying these domed brass ornaments as the perforated tops of



Fig. 3. Domed brass ornament from Magozastad in the Marico district (scale in mm).

disassembled Dutch buttons like the ones found in the Vergelegen slave lodge. Their masses were 0,84 grammes and 0,41 grammes and they were relatively uncorroded.

Similar domed brass artefacts, some with single and some with double perforations, have been found in the upper layers of several Later Stone Age sites in the western Cape coastal region and the Cederberg (A.B.

Smith pers. comm.; J.E. Parkington pers. comm.). It is tempting to speculate that refashioned brass buttons were traded from the Cape, through Namaqualand, to the northwestern Transvaal and that these characteristic ornaments might be clear indications of such trade. It is likely that others have arrived at similar conclusions already but this note is intended to alert archaeologists to the identification of these brass domes as reworked buttons in the hope that more examples might be forthcoming.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Jan Boeyens (UNISA) for permission to publish the description of the artefacts from the Marico. Gavin Evans took the photographs.

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Southern African Field Archaeology 2:108-110. 1993.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM MUMBWA CAVES, CENTRAL ZAMBIA*

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A combined team representing Zambia's National Heritage and Conservation Commission, the National Museum, Livingstone, and the universities of Bristol and Oxford spent three weeks in June 1993 examining the deepest deposits of the main cave at Mumbwa, central Zambia (Fig. 1). The complex of caves and rock shelters generally known as Mumbwa Caves has been investigated at irregular intervals since 1925 (Macrae 1926; Dart & Del Grande 1931; Clark 1942; Savage 1983). The 1930 excavations of Dart & Del Grande discovered a quartz based Middle Stone Age assemblage (see Volman 1984:184-5) overlying bedrock at a depth of nearly seven metres. The objective of the 1993 investigation was to assess the extent of this earliest deposit and to collect sediment samples for dating and environmental analysis.

Three test pits were sunk, two to the north of Dart & Del Grande's central pit - squares H6 and G4 - and the third cutting into the surviving section of the central pit - square E9 (Fig. 2). The two northern test pits proved to

be largely sterile, with no evidence of occupation overlying bedrock. The excavation of E9 confirmed Dart & Del Grande's basic sequence with MSA material appearing beneath the sterile 'red clay' of the central pit (Fig. 3).

Bedrock was not reached in E9 as the original section face appears to have collapsed at a depth of 6 metres and been replaced by later infill. An unfortunate consequence of the collapse was the rapid reduction in area of intact lower deposit available for excavation in E9. At best, the deposit extended across 0,50 m of the one metre square decreasing to less than 150 mm near the base.

Given this limitation, the high concentration of largely quartz debitage from lower E9 is impressive (Table 1). It suggests that further excavation of the central pit area could yield the largest stratified sample of early MSA known from Zambia to date. The retouched pieces are too few in number to make firm typological comparisons, but the presence of small flake tools and the