

## EARLY IRON AGE POTTERY FROM CANASTA PLACE, EAST LONDON DISTRICT\*

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\*Accepted for publication June 1994

### ABSTRACT

The Early Iron Age pottery assemblage from Canasta Place is of special interest because it represents the southern-most inland find of this kind so far. Despite the fragmentary nature of the potsherds and small size of the sample, decorative motifs and vessel profiles suggest that there is a relationship with Natal Early Iron Age phases *i.e.* Msuluzi, Ndongondwane and Ntshekane as well as Transkei's two Early Iron Age phases.

### INTRODUCTION

Canasta Place (33.00 S; 27.47 E) is 12 km west of East London and lies on the west bank of Buffalo River (Fig. 1). The vegetation in the study area is valley bushveld that has been cleared in patches to make place for pineapples fields. Summer rainfall starts in August and the climate allows the growing of tropical fruits like pawpaws, pineapples, oranges, apples and guavas. Water is available from fountains and the Buffalo River. Game such as bushbuck, porcupine and wildpig is still abundant.

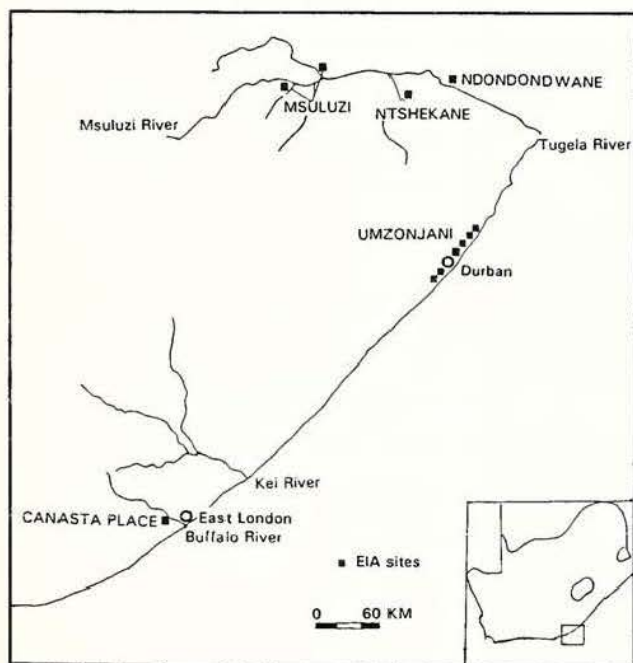


Fig. 1. Location of Canasta Place and other Early Iron Age sites mentioned in the text.

The presence of large quantities of Iron Age pottery fragments were observed by the owner of Canasta Place, Mrs Horrmann, during gardening activities. The pottery was identified by Professor H.J. Deacon, of the University of Stellenbosch, as belonging to an Early Iron Age (EIA) variant. This has created some interest because it is the southernmost inland occurrence of such ware found so far. An archaeological investigation of the site by the author took place during field work lasting six months from March to October, 1992.

Previous investigations into the EIA in the Transkei and Ciskei includes work at Buffalo River Mouth (Wells 1934; Laidler 1935), at Chalumna River Mouth (Derricourt 1977) and additional research by Feely (1987) and Prins (1989). There is also a recent find in the Kei Valley which is currently under investigation (Binneman *et al.* 1992). In Natal, the study of the EIA is more advanced through the endeavours of Maggs and Michael (1976), Maggs (1980b, 1980c, 1984) and Maggs and Ward (1984). The main aim of this report is to describe the pottery finds at Canasta Place and to indicate possible relationships with Transkei and Natal assemblages.

### SITE DESCRIPTION AND EXCAVATION.

At Canasta Place and adjacent farms, pottery is observed in patches over an area of several kilometres but the main pottery site (80 m x 30 m) is in an orchard close to the farm homestead (Fig. 2). Ploughing activities have caused considerable disturbance and breakage of the pottery. Material belonging to the contact period is to be found together with the EIA ware in the topsoil.

Excavation was conducted by a system of trenches using 50 mm spits with each trench 60 m long, 2 m wide and 0,20 m deep (Fig. 2). No features such as grain pits or hut floors were encountered. Archaeological material



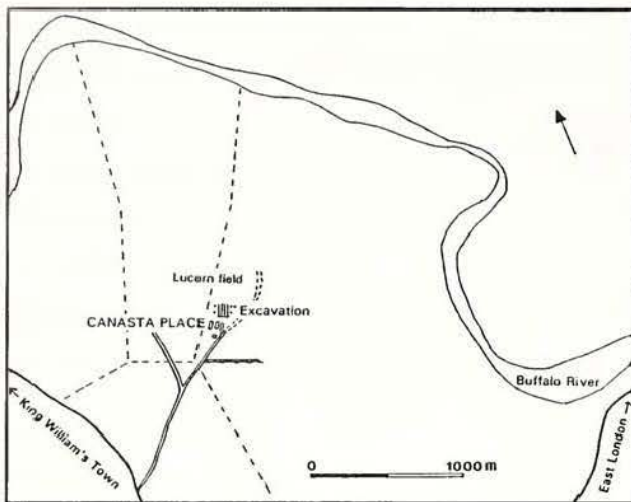


Fig. 2. Location of the excavation at Canasta Place.

occurs to a depth of 0,50 m. In the topsoil this includes a mixture of pottery fragments, glass beads, copper bangles, porcelain pieces and household items while lower down only pottery associated with baked clay beads were found. The pottery is mostly concentrated in the eastern section of the excavation. A description of the material belonging to the contact period is not included in this report.

### POTTERY ANALYSIS

A total number of 240 diagnostic fragments were recovered. These include decorated body sherds, decorated rim sherds and plain rim sherds (Table 1). Analysis took place at the Natal Museum under the guidance of Mr F. Prins and Ms V. Ward. The methodology was similar to that used in the analysis of material from EIA sites in Transkei and Natal. Analysis focused only on decoration because the fragments were too small to reconstruct rim diameters and vessel profiles with confidence, but an attempt was nevertheless made to reconstruct vessel shapes by using technologies developed by Natal Museum (Fig. 4b, c & d). The purpose of the analysis was to compare the Natal/Transkei wares and Canasta Place ware.

Some of the sherds indicate that a coil technique was used in the construction of the vessels (Gitywa 1970:2). A possible site for the firing *i.e.* kilns or ovens, was discovered in a ploughed lucern land close by at a depth of 0,50 m under the surface. Baked clay pieces, pottery sherds, quantities of charcoal, burnt wood and ash occur. Black burnish has been identified on very few sherds. A detailed analysis of decorated body sherds and decorated rim sherds is shown in Table 1. A total of 57 plain rim sherds were also identified. The thickness of the body sherds varies between 5-14 mm and the majority of the sherds lie in the range of 8-10 mm thick. The diagnostic rim sherds (excluding plain rims) have the following forms: inward sloping neck, 18 (Fig. 3c); everted neck, 4 (Figs 3b & 3d); inward sloping neck, 18 (Fig. 3c); hemispherical, 12 (Fig. 4a); open, 5 (Fig. 4c); wide-mouthed, 1 (4b) and subcarinated, 5 (Fig. 4d).

Table 1. Canasta Place: Motif categories and total number of both the diagnostic rim sherds and diagnostic body sherds (excluding plain sherds).

Feature	Decoration	Number of Rim Sherds	Number of Body Sherds	Total
	Hatching	8	49	57
	Even cross hatching	18	27	45
	Uneven cross hatching	0	15	15
	Opposite hatching	2	53	55
	Opposite hatching with intervening groove	0	2	2
	Hatched interlocking triangles	1	2	3
	Band of opposite hatching below a band of cross hatching	0	1	1
	Applied bosses	2	0	2
	Lip notching	1	0	1
	Plain Band above even cross hatching	1	0	2
				183

### ASSOCIATIONS

The general consensus amongst pottery analysts at Natal Museum is that there are aspects of Natal's EIA *i.e.* Msuluzi, possibly Ndongondwane and Ntshekane phases at Canasta Place. There is no evidence of an earlier Matola phase.

Pottery from Canasta Place shows characteristics that link it with the EIA from Natal and Transkei. Lip decoration (mostly cross-hatching) in figures 3f & 3g which is common at Canasta Place occurs also in Natal but not frequently at sites in the Mngeni Valley (Gavin Whitelaw pers. comm.). Interestingly this method of decoration has not been recognised in Transkei (Prins pers. comm.). Hatching on the lip has however been found at Chalumna and Buffalo River Mouth by Derricourt (1977:113).

Decorative motifs found in Ntshekane include even cross-hatching (27 body sherds) (Figs 3c). Bands of hatching (57 body sherds) (Fig. 3j) represents Ndongondwane phase while even cross-hatching (15 body sherds) (Fig. 3a) opposed hatching (53 body sherds) (Fig. 3k) and oblique hatching (49 body sherds) (Figs 3b & 3h) are typical of Msuluzi.

Position of decoration is also considered to determine associations. Ntshekane is characterised by decoration that is usually confined to the lower two-thirds of the inward sloping necks but sometimes occurs higher up as well (Figs 3c). Ndongondwane have pots with one or less often, two or three bands of decoration on the lower half of the neck ending at the body neck junction with a broad undecorated band above it (Fig. 3i) while Msuluzi displays whole of neck decoration (Fig. 3b).

Further characteristics used to determine associations are vessel profiles although this method is not reliable due to the fragmentary nature of the potsherds. Vessel profiles common to the Ntshekane Tradition are inward



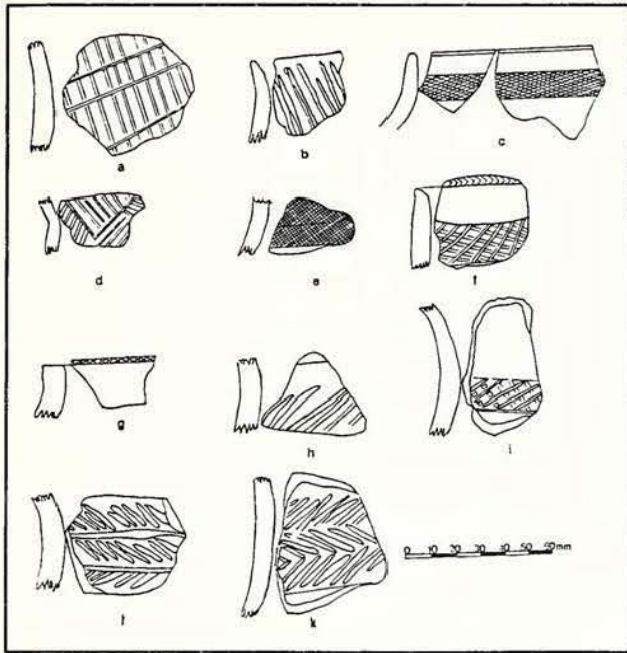


Fig. 3. Decorated pottery fragments from Canasta Place.

sloping necks of which 30 examples (both decorated and plain rims added) were recognised at Canasta Place (Figures 3c). Upright neck vessels (Fig. 3f) of which 6 examples were also counted amongst plain rims, predominate at Ndongondwane Tradition while everted neck profiles, of which 7 examples were recognised, are typical of Msuluzi (Figs 3b & 3d).

The Early Iron Age from Transkei which has been named Ntsitsana/Msuluzi suggest cultural continuity between Natal EIA and Canasta Place (Prins pers. comm.). The possibility of the occurrence of Ntshekane at Canasta Place is surprising as no definite identification of this phase has been made in Transkei (Prins pers. comm.). However, the absence of the earliest Natal EIA phase (Matola Tradition) at Canasta Place, as is the case in Transkei, was expected. Other aspects of the Early Iron Age found in Transkei and in Natal but absent from Canasta Place are clay figurines, red ochre and graphite burnishing.

### CONCLUSION

Maggs (1984) suggested that pottery found at settlements in the Natal valleys and the bushveld and lowveld of the Transvaal dating from the 5th and 6th century onwards, had altered sufficiently from the older Matola ceramic tradition and this has been named Lydenburg tradition (Feely 1987:43). Msuluzi, Ndongondwane and Ntshekane wares all fall into this temporal sequence. Phillipson (1987) states that the EIA from Lydenburg is akin to that first described from occurrences on the Natal coast near Durban and designated NC3 by Schofield (1948). This material is now known from more than sixty sites spreading from Swaziland southwards through Natal

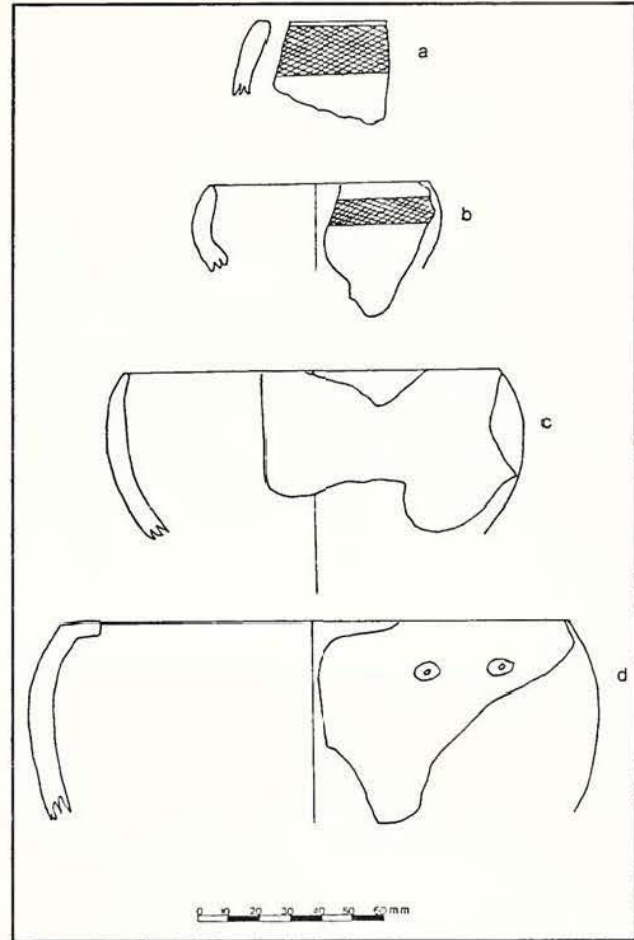


Fig. 4. Canasta Place: forms of diagnostic rim sherds.

coastal belt as far as Transkei and as the finds in the Kei River Valley (Binneman *et al.* 1992) and at Canasta Place indicate, even further southwards.

Pottery from Canasta Place shows striking similarities and a few differences with ware from EIA sites in Natal and Transkei. It is also different from finds at Buffalo River Mouth and Chalumna River Mouth because of the presence of square rim forms in the latter two traditions. The size of the site and spread of pottery at Canasta Place is sufficient to suggest that it is not an isolated occurrence and that other sites of the same age could occur in the region. Canasta Place is a contribution to our present state of knowledge on the spread of the EIA in South Africa and needs to be followed up with an extensive survey programme.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the following people; Mr and Mrs Horrmann for permission to conduct research on their property and the interest they showed at all times; Mr Frans Prins and Ms Val Ward for giving advice on the analysis of the pottery; Dr H. Opperman for supervising the project. The project was funded by the University of Fort Hare.

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