

NOTES

DUTCH BRASS BUTTONS FROM THE SHIPWRECK OF THE "OOSTERLAND" (1697): A RESPONSE TO MILLER AND MARKELL.

BRUNO E.J.S. WERZ

*Department of Archaeology,
University of Cape Town,
Rondebosch, 7700*

In their recent article, Drs D. Miller and A. Markell draw attention to the occurrence of Dutch brass buttons on archaeological sites in the Cape and the Transvaal. Artefacts from three sites; the slave lodge on the Vergelegen estate in Somerset West and two late Iron Age sites in the Marico district, were mentioned specifically. In addition, reference was made to similar finds from several Late Stone Age sites in the western Cape coastal region and the Cederberg. The authors speculated that these buttons were imported by Dutch colonists and that some of these artefacts were subsequently refashioned by indigenous people. This was substantiated by a documentary reference dating to 1785 (Miller & Markell 1993:107-108).

Recent research focussing on the maritime archaeology of Table Bay has revealed some more evidence for the use of Dutch brass buttons, specifically during the 17th century. In this context it is interesting to draw attention to what could well be the earliest historical account relating to the exchange of such items at the Cape. In a resolution, dated Sunday 29 June 1659 at the Fort of Good Hope, reference is made to Oedaso, the chief of the Cochoquas or Saldanhars (Thom 1958:77, 83) with whom the Dutch occasionally bartered cattle. In here it reads that :

...it is decided once more to send messengers to Oedaso, and to show greater respect by having the fiscal take along a wagon to-morrow morning as if for the purpose of fetching him. The fiscal shall again take some tobacco, beads, copper, and buttons made of the same metal, as presents, with instructions to try to persuade him, in the most friendly manner possible, to return with him (Thom 1958:84).

Throughout Van Riebeeck's journal, several entries indicate that copper was a metal highly valued by indigenous people and extensively used in the cattle and sheep trade. Mostly, however, use was made of plate copper and wire. It is very likely that the word 'copper' was used in this context to indicate both the specific

metal and its alloy brass.

Archaeological evidence for 17th century Dutch brass buttons at the Cape has also been found within a maritime context. The underwater excavation of the Dutch East India Company ship "Oosterland" (1697) in Table Bay has provided a few examples, some of which resemble the ones referred to by Miller and Markell. The buttons recovered from the "Oosterland" however, seem to have been used according to their original function and were probably not intended for bartering. Circumstantial evidence which supports this assumption relates to the fact that at the time of sinking, the "Oosterland" was on its return voyage to The Netherlands (Werz 1992:87). If the ship was loaded with copper and brass products manufactured in Europe and intended for the Cape, it is more likely that these would have already been off-loaded during the outward-bound voyage in 1694-1695. In addition, only six brass buttons representing three different types have been found on the shipwreck thusfar. If a consignment of buttons would have been carried with as part of the ship's stores or for purposes of trading, then it would be expected to find many more identical examples.

Five of the buttons were found in an area which was situated towards the stern part of the vessel (Figs 1 & 2), the place where the officers and most of the non-commissioned officers were accommodated. This section was some distance away from the cargo hold, the most obvious place to store trade goods during the voyage (Werz 1993:37-38). The sixth button (91-4-22/IS No. 2) (Fig. 3), was found outside the main excavation area. In addition, a non-metal button was found (93-1-26/3E) (Fig. 4). The variety of buttons, their limited number and the place of deposition on the wrecksite, together with the fact that the "Oosterland" foundered on its return voyage, seems to indicate that they formed part of the clothing worn by people onboard.

Of the six brass buttons, three are identical in size and appearance and resemble those depicted in figure 1 of the Miller and Markell article. Their diameter measures 18 mm with a mass of between 3.2 and 5.8 grammes (Figs 1 & 2). The last figure is, however, not an accurate



Fig.1. Hollow brass buttons (left: 93-3-9/7-8; right: 93-1-12/6; centre: 91-4-9/3-4NE N1).



Fig.2. Brass dome-shaped buttons (left: 93-1-28/6; right: 93-1-28/7).

reflection of the objects weight due to residue inside. The buttons have each been assembled from two dome shaped discs which are soldered together. The bottom disc of each artefact has two small holes and in the center a brass wire shaped into an eye for attachment to a garment or for suspension. The top disc of each button shows a basic decoration consisting of a series of concentric circles. The domed discs were shaped by hammering a small copper plate in a mould using a ball-shaped punch.

The other three brass buttons differ in appearance from the ones mentioned above. 93-1-28/6 and 93-1-28/7 (Fig. 2) are identical in shape but their diameter and mass differs. 93-1-28/6 has a diameter of 9.6 mm and a mass of 1.7 grammes, while 93-1-28/7 measures 13 mm with a mass of 2.9 grammes. Both are solid and dome-shaped. They were probably cast, as is indicated by a seam on the underside. Both buttons also have an attachment in the form of a brass eye. Button 91-4-22/IS No.2 (Fig. 3) is probably a uniform button as it bears a



Fig.3. Brass uniform button with anchor decoration (91-4-22/IS N2).



Fig.4. Wooden button (93-1-26/3E).

decoration in the form of a ship's anchor. This button is flat and was either cast or stamped out. At the back, the remains of two small eyes can be discerned but these are worn through.

The seventh button recovered thusfar from the "Oosterland", number 93-1-26/3E (Fig. 4), has a diameter of 15.3 mm and a mass of 0.4 grammes. Its shape resembles that of a modern shirt button, a slightly curved disc with two holes near the center. Infra-red spectroscopic analyses undertaken in the Archaeometry Laboratory of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town proved that this button was made of wood.

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