

# PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE INVESTIGATIONS AT KULUBELE, AN EARLY IRON AGE FARMING SETTLEMENT IN THE GREAT KEI RIVER VALLEY, EASTERN CAPE\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on recent excavations at Kulubele, an early farming settlement in the Great Kei River valley. The site is radiocarbon dated to the 8th and 9th centuries AD. The ceramic finds are typologically similar to those associated with the Msuluzi phase in KwaZulu-Natal and northern Transkei. Iron slag and tuyere fragments are abundant and indicate that iron-working took place at the settlement. Other cultural material retrieved from the site include a flat iron point, iron beads, shell and ostrich eggshell beads, marine shell ornaments, stone artifacts, bone points and fragments of broken figurines. Evidence of structures were found in the form of reed/stick-impressed daga and a small portion of a daga floor, possibly a hut floor. The faunal remains comprised mainly sheep. Although the project is still in an early phase it would appear that the data from Kulubele confirm much of what is known about early farming settlements in KwaZulu-Natal and northern Transkei.

## INTRODUCTION

The region south-west of the Great Kei River represents the most southerly distribution of the Nguni-speaking people. Today AmaXhosa compose the majority of the people in the region. We know, however, from historical records that these people were living in permanent settlements close to the Sunday's River in approximately 1789 (see Peires 1981; Maclennan 1986). Until recently virtually no research has been conducted into the origins, settlement and socio-economic past of Early Iron Age farming communities in this region. It is therefore not surprising that some historians have been of the opinion that Bantu people were recent settlers to the eastern Cape (see Hall 1992). Archaeologists have presented evidence and argued against such an assumption based on finds of Early Iron Age ceramics along the Transkei and Ciskei coasts<sup>1</sup> (Rudner 1968; Derricourt 1977; Maggs 1980b; Cronin 1982; Feely 1987). The isolated finds from the Ciskei and Alexandria coasts, however, were associated with Late Stone Age pastoralist pottery and therefore do not suggest permanent settlement by Early Iron Age farming communities (Webley & Binneman 1992). Maggs (1980a) suggests that the Chalumna River (Derricourt 1977) along the Ciskei coast is the most southerly limit

of Early Iron Age settlement. Although I would agree with Maggs, we still lack convincing evidence. Since Chalumna River is only dated to ca AD 1390 (Pta-932) and none of the potsherds were decorated, it would appear that this site was not occupied by Early Iron Age people (Webley & Binneman 1992). Recently, a large surface collection of Early Iron Age ceramics was made near East London (Nogwaza 1994). However, no *in situ* features were found, nor were the ceramics directly dated. Nevertheless this find probably represents the most southerly evidence of an Early Iron Age settlement in southern Africa.

During the past two decades, archaeologists have systematically researched the history of Early Iron Age farming communities in KwaZulu-Natal. Their work resulted in well-established chronological and typological framework and settlement and economic patterns for the period between AD 650 and AD 1000 (Maggs & Michael 1976; Maggs 1980, 1984; Van Schalkwyk 1991, 1994a, 1994b; Loubser 1993; Whitelaw 1993, 1994). This relatively short period has been divided into three different ceramic phases based on vessel profile, decoration motif and decoration placement. These phases are known as Msuluzi (AD 650-790), Ndongondwane (AD 790-900) and Ntshekane (AD 890-1080) (all calibrated). Recent research north of Umtata in Transkei (Prins 1993; Prins & Granger 1993) identified two phases, Ntsitsana/ Msuluzi (AD 779) and Ntsitsana/

1. References to the former Transkei and Ciskei were retained for geographical orientation and discussion.

Ndondondwane (AD 896) (both calibrated). Further to the south, Cronin (1982) reported dates of AD 640 and AD 720 (calibrated to AD 769 and AD 874) from an Early Iron Age shell midden at Mpame River Mouth along the Transkei coast.

### THE SITE

Kulubele (27.51S; 32.25E) is situated on the west bank of the Great Kei River valley in the Stutterheim district near the town of Komga in the Eastern Cape Province (Fig. 1). The site is located some 200 m below the plateau and 60 km inland from the coast. It was discovered during the late 1980's by Victor Biggs, a local farmer, who found decorated potsherds on the edge of a erosion donga (Binneman *et al.*). During a visit in 1992 with Tom Huffman and Simon Hall from the University of the Witwatersrand, several pits and a dung lens were found exposed in the side of the same erosion donga. Investigations between 1993-5 have been on a small scale and include the excavation of two pits and ten square metres of a midden as well as the exposure of two square metres of a daga floor.

### EXCAVATIONS

The large donga which cuts through the southern end of the site as well as the erosion of its sides appears to have destroyed a large and important part of the settlement. Apart from the pits exposed in the side of the donga and some material scattered in isolated locations along the edge, no other exposure of material was visible. A number of pits were dug in the adjacent field to find the extent of the settlement.

#### Storage pits

Pit 1 was exposed in the side of a large donga and was filled with a large number of potsherds. A scatter of broken cobble stones marked the top. The pit was 1,0 m deep and 84 cm in diameter at the top, tapering down to 60 cm near the bottom. The bottom of the pit was flat rather than concave. Little stratigraphy was visible in the brown sandy fill except for the bottom 0,40 m which consisted of a grey/white ashy soil. As a control the remains were removed in 20 cm units. The topmost unit consisted of loose soil followed by a thick layer of broken potsherds. The remainder of the fill contained few sherds. The bulk of the sherds was recovered from the eroded side of the pit which meant that some of the contents have been lost and washed down the slope. The opposite wall-side contained virtually no sherds. Other cultural material included stone flakes, shell beads and a fresh water mussel pendant. Little bone was recovered. Charcoal collected near the bottom of the pit was radiocarbon dated to  $1250 \pm 40$  BP (Pta-5865) calibrated to AD 779- 823, 827, 857-883 (central intercepts in bold).

Pit 2 was situated in the vertical bank of the Kulubele River and was virtually completely washed out with only a few sherds remaining in the side of the donga. The

bottom of the pit was 2,80 m below the surface and the depth of the opening is unknown. A fine gravel layer some 90 cm from the surface may indicate the original surface from where the pit was dug. A lens of charcoal 1,80 m from the surface marked the start of the bottom section of the pit. The pit was 47 cm in diameter at this point. The bottom of the pit was concave and filled with fine, soft white ashy soil with occasional potsherds.

#### Midden excavation

Ten square metres have been excavated in a midden some 100 m from the edge of the donga in an adjacent field. The deposit was between 45 cm and 15 cm deep. The surface unit comprised 15 cm of dark-grey soil which had been disturbed by ploughing. The soil underlying the plough zone was slightly more red/orange-brown overlying a soft grey/white ashy soil. The ceramics from all three units were very fragmentary. A radiocarbon date of  $1270 \pm 50$  BP (Pta-6982) calibrated to AD 717-737; 762-790-879 (central intercept in bold) has been obtained from the bottom of the grey ash.

#### Daga floor excavation

A test pit dug some 50 m from the midden excavation exposed a daga floor approximately 70 cm below the surface. The full extent of the floor is not known because only 2 square metres have been excavated. A thin lens of archaeological material rich in ceramics and bone was situated 20 cm above the floor. The ceramics from this lens can be attributed to the Msuluzi phase.

### CULTURAL REMAINS

#### Ceramics: pots and bowls

A small number of decorated potsherds were recovered from the pit whereas a relatively large sample came from the midden excavation. The assemblage, however, was fragmentary and large pot fragments in general were broken at the neck/shoulder junction which made it difficult to establish the extent of shoulder and body decoration. The majority of vessels were decorated only on the rim and occasionally on the lip and the inside of the rim. Only a few decorated body fragments were found which indicate that shoulder and body decoration occurred less frequently. The most common band motifs were hatching, cross-hatching (even and unevenly spaced), herringbone and alternating triangles. The incisions range from heavy, deep, rough U- and V-shaped incisions to carefully executed, shallow U- and V-shaped incisions.

The ceramic assemblage at Kulubele was divided into 17 classes (including undecorated vessels) using vessel profile, decoration placement and decoration following Huffman 1980. The following classes were identified:

1. Pot with an everted neck with a band of decoration on the rim and pendant motifs on the shoulder (Fig. 2.1).
2. Pot with an everted neck with a band of decoration on the rim and a band inside the neck (Fig. 2.2).

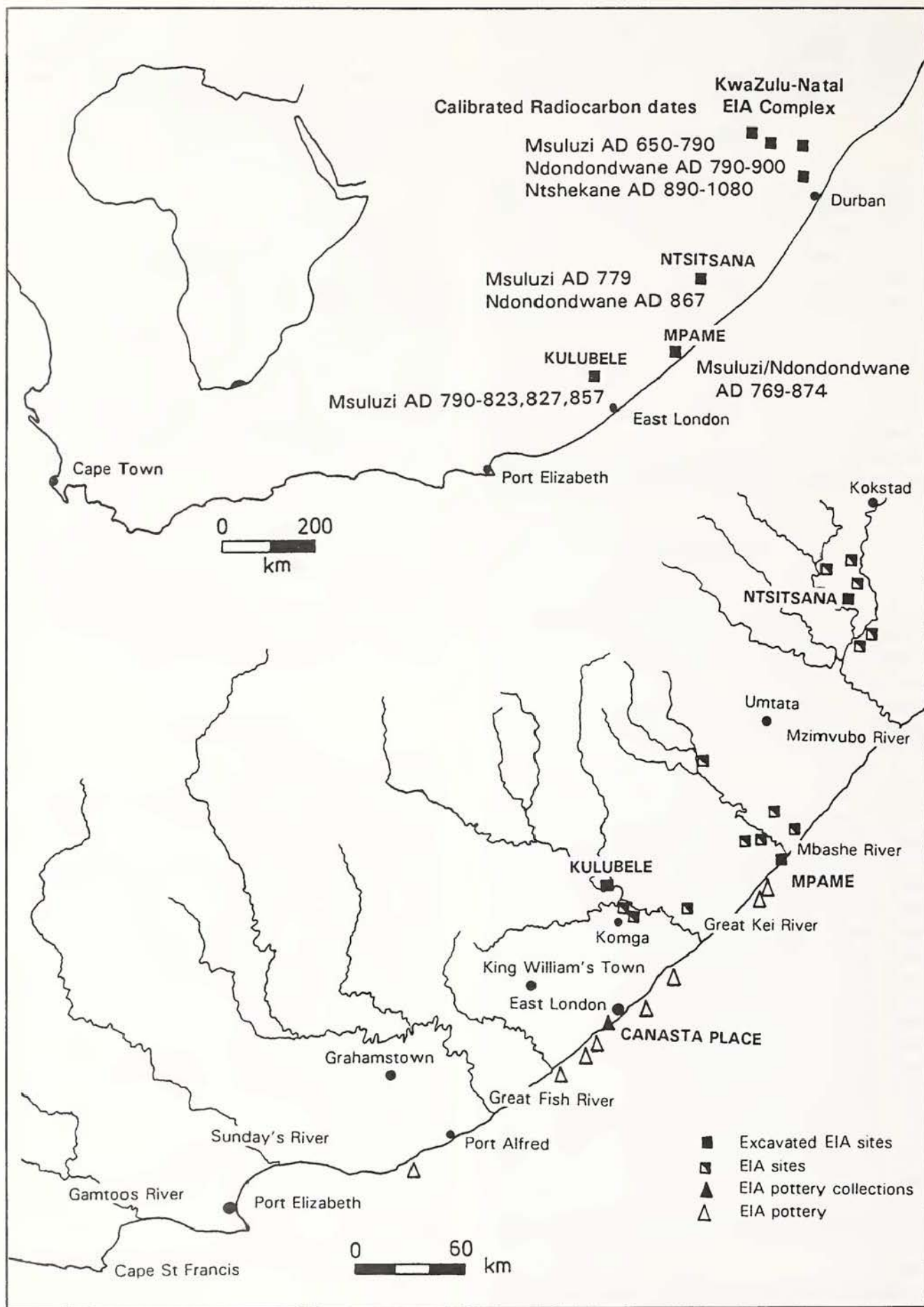


Fig.1. Location of Kulubele and radiocarbon dates for EIA sites in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape regions.

Note: This class consists of small fragments only and although the full extent of the decoration cannot be established, it is considered sufficient evidence for an independent class.

3. Pot with an everted neck with a band of decoration on the rim and a band on the neck (Fig. 2.3).
4. Pot with an everted neck with herringbone incisions on the lip and a band of decoration below the rim (Fig. 2.4). Note: This class consist of small fragments only and although the full extent of the decoration cannot be established, it is considered sufficient evidence for a independent class.
5. Pot with an everted neck with diagonal incisions on the lip and a band of decoration on the neck (Fig. 2.5).
6. Pot with an everted neck with a band of decoration below the rim (Fig. 2.6).
7. Pot with an everted neck with a band of decoration on the neck (Fig. 2.7).
8. Plain pot with everted neck (Fig. 2.8).
9. Plain open bowls (Fig. 3.1).
10. Plain inturned bowls (Fig. 3.2).
11. Plain deep-straight sided bowls (Fig. 3.3).
12. Deep straight-sided bowl with diagonal incisions on the lip (Fig. 3.4).
13. Deep straight-sided bowl with a band of decoration on the inside rim (Fig. 3.5).
14. Inturned bowls with diagonal incisions on the lip (Fig. 3.6).
15. Inturned bowls with a band on the rim (Fig. 3.7).
16. Inturned bowls with a band of decoration on the rim and lower body. (Fig. 3.8)
17. Inturned bowls with diagonal incisions on the lip and a band of decoration on the rim (Fig. 3.9).

### Discussion of the ceramics

Although fragmentary, the Kulubele assemblage provided sufficient information to be identified and classified with the Msuluzi phase as first described by Maggs (1980a) for the Msuluzi Confluence site in KwaZulu-Natal.

The most obvious difference is the absence of elaborate decoration on the shoulder and lower body of pots. This attribute seems also to be absent from Ntsitsana in northern Transkei. An interesting aspect of the Kulubele pots is the decoration inside the neck of several vessels. No decoration on the inside of pots has been reported from KwaZulu-Natal or northern Transkei (Prins 1993, Prins & Granger 1993). Inturned bowls from Kulubele were decorated but no typical Msuluzi bowls or carinated bowls were present.

### Other ceramic items

Several small ceramic fragments were recovered which may have been parts of figurines (Fig. 4.5). The best preserved fragment was in the shape of a horn and may have been part either of a sculptured ceramic animal or attached to a mask. Several broken fragments of ceramic discs with a single round hole in the centre were

also found (Fig. 4.6 & 4.7). The largest disc fragment was 6,5 cm in diameter with fine impressed parallel rows of decoration running from the centre hole (6 mm in diameter) to the outer edge. An interesting find was a flat, semi-circular ceramic modelled object (Fig. 4.3). One end was pressed backwards to create a thick concave surface. Several wide, parallel, U-shaped lines are modelled along the width of the object, suggesting a 'stamp' of some sort.

### Iron-working remains

The relatively large quantities of slag and tuyere fragments in the midden excavation indicate that iron-working activities were commonly practiced at Kulubele. The slag consists mainly of small pieces but the occasional fist-size piece was found. Only a few pieces of heavy, dark coloured ore were recovered. No attempts have yet been made to locate the source of ore nor has any analysis been conducted. No complete tuyere cross-sections were found but many end fragments were vitrified.

Iron artefacts from the midden excavation include four iron beads and a small flat point.

### Stone artefacts

Apart from the typical lower grindstones and upper grindstones a large number of Later Stone Age stone artefacts were also recovered from the midden excavation. These include scrapers, adzes, cores and flakes manufactured mainly from hornfels.

### Bone and ivory

Several bone points, awls (Fig. 4.4), polished bone fragments, a pendant (Fig. 4.2) and a decorated pipe fragment (Fig. 4.1) were found. The pipe fragment has a wide cross-hatched motif at the open end and a second one at the broken end. Two broken ivory bangles were also recovered from the midden excavation.

### Shell

A large number of shell beads were recovered, many red ochre stained. No attempt has yet been made to identify materials for bead-making other than ostrich eggshell. OES beads comprise small and large ones, and a few were incomplete. Similar size beads were also manufactured from other shell.

A relatively large number of marine shell fragments and a few complete ones were found at Kulubele, mainly *Perna perna* and *Patella miniata*. The edges of whole *P. miniata* shell and most fragments were ground into a round shape. Their use is not known, but they may have been used for cleaning the inside of pots.

## SUBSISTENCE

### Mammal remains

The mammal fauna has not been analysed in full but preliminary analysis indicates that the bulk belongs to sheep/goat (J. Brink pers. comm.). Some sheep could be

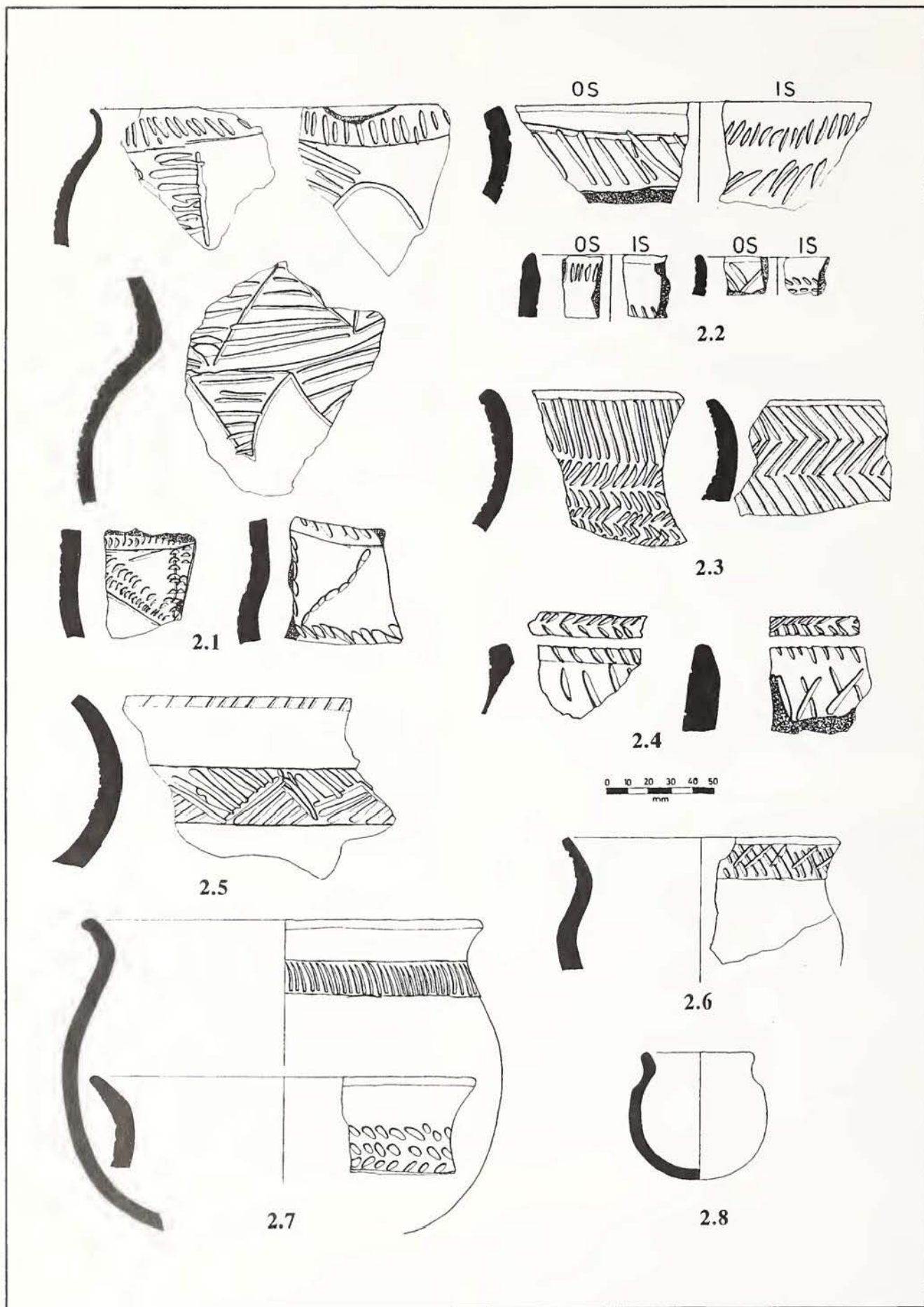


Fig. 2. Decorated pots from Kulubele. Classes 1-8.

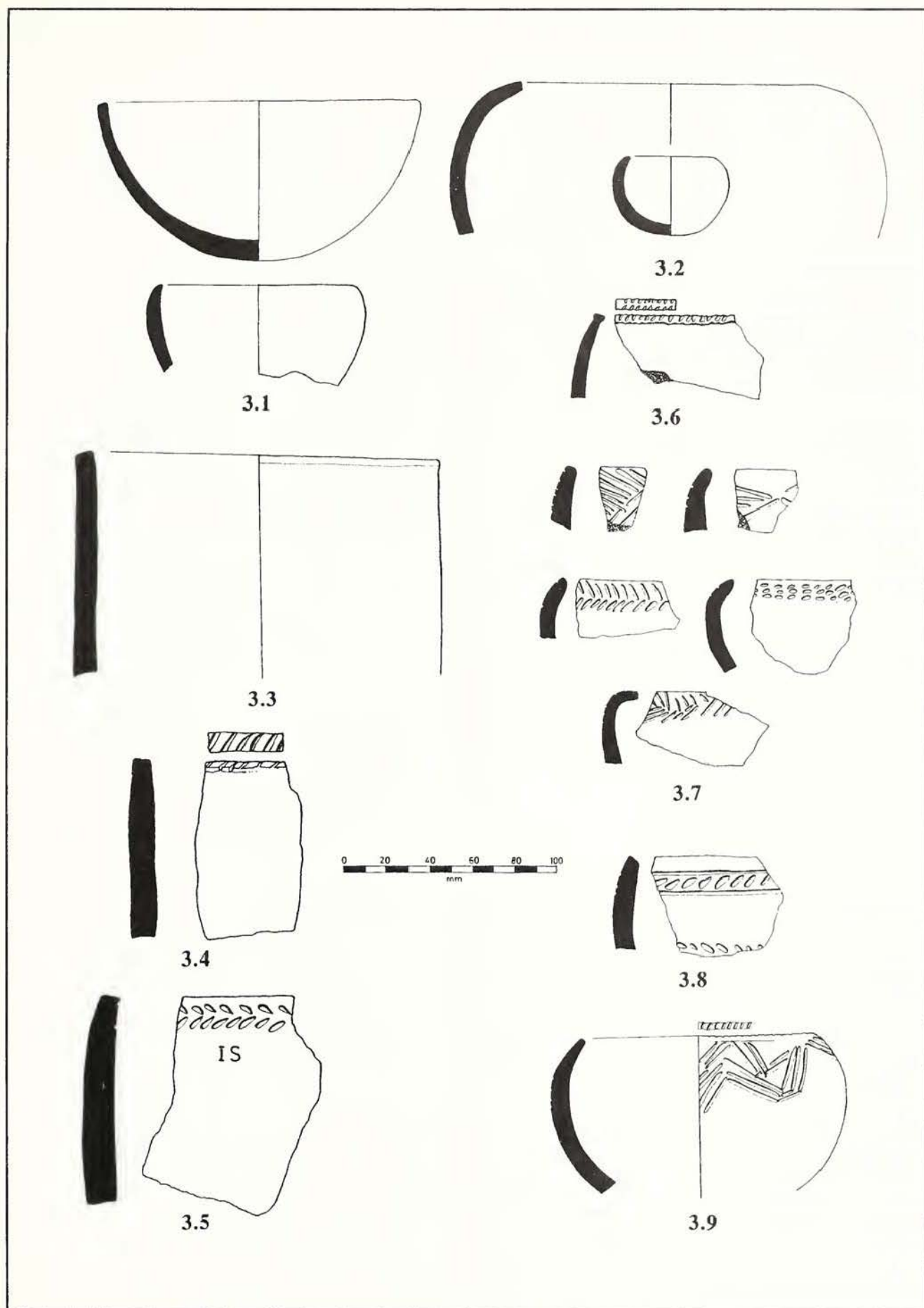


Fig. 3. Decorated bowls from Kulubele. Classes 9-17.

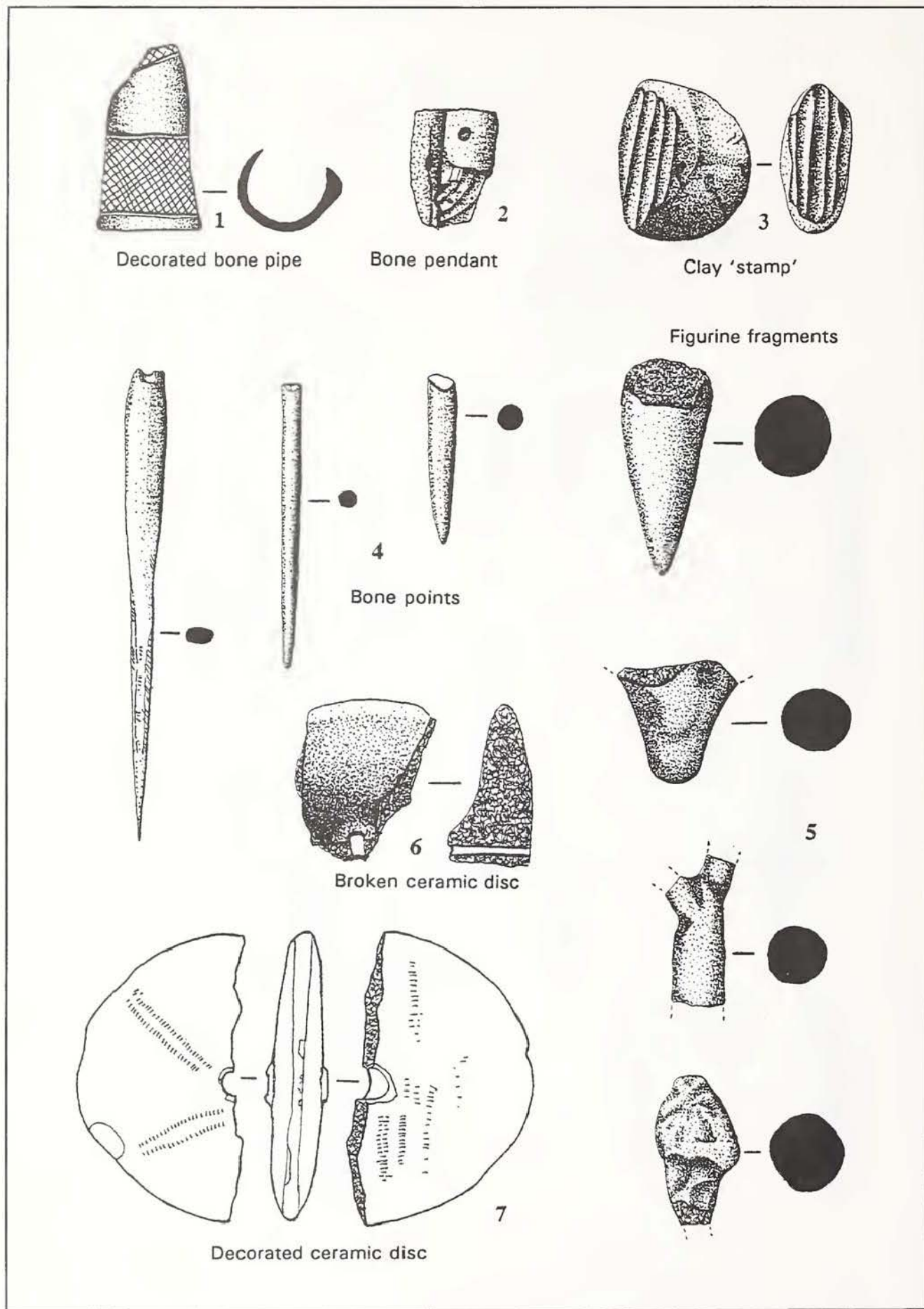


Fig. 4. Cultural objects from Kulubele.

positively identified. Small bovid remains are also present.

### CONCLUSIONS

Kulubele is the first Early Iron Age site with *in situ* features excavated south-west of the Great Kei River. It provides us with valuable insights into the first early farming communities in this part of the Eastern Cape Province. As expected, this site was occupied somewhat later than those in KwaZulu-Natal (towards the end/beginning of the Msuluzi/Ndondondwane phases), but falls within the range of radiocarbon dates for Ntsitsana and Mpame. This suggests a relatively rapid spread of Early Iron Age communities westwards along the east coast of Southern Africa. In general the ceramics from Kulubele are similar to those from the Msuluzi phase in KwaZulu-Natal. The absence of elaborate decorative motives on the shoulder and lower body of vessels suggests that the Kulubele assemblage may represent a transition between the Msuluzi/ Ndondondwane phases. Further research, however, is needed to confirm this assumption.

Cultural remains suggest that the socio-economic organisation of the Early Iron Age farming communities in the Great Kei River valley was similar to those further north. The dung lens associated with pits in the erosion donga suggests a Central Cattle Pattern (Huffman 1990, 1993). The incomplete OES beads indicates that these were manufactured on site and although it is not known who the bead-makers were, the microlithic stone tools suggest that there was interaction with hunter-gatherers

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