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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE BEAULEY EARLY IRON AGE SITE IN THE BLOUBERG, NORTHERN PROVINCE*

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ABSTRACT

A recent survey of the Blouberg/Makgabeng area of Northern Province has revealed a number of Early Iron Age sites. So far preliminary excavation has taken place on two of these. The site under discussion here, situated on the farm Beauley, is radiocarbon dated to the 10th century AD. Analyses of the pottery further links this site to the Early Iron Age. Other cultural material retrieved from the site includes iron objects, iron slag, tuyères, worked bone and ostrich eggshell beads.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, various scholars have researched the Early Iron Age in the northern and western parts of Northern Province (Meyer 1980; Hanisch 1979, 1980), in the Limpopo river valley (Prinsloo 1974), in the Soutpansberg and the Lephalala River (Aukema, in Huffman 1990b). However, very little research has been done in the intervening area (Fig. 1). A recent survey of this area, more specifically the Blouberg/Makgabeng area, revealed a number of sites with Early Iron Age ceramics. Although about ten such sites are known, preliminary excavations have been carried out on only two.

The area under consideration forms part of the larger Pietersburg plateau. The geology of this flat land is mostly alluvium of Quaternary age, with some diabase intrusions (Brandl 1986:26). Being fertile and easy to cultivate, these alluvial soils must have been part of the attraction for Early Iron Age agriculturalists to settle here.

The Blouberg/Makgabeng area is situated approximately 100 km northwest of Pietersburg. Here, the plateau is characterised by two topographical phenomena. Blouberg, a mountain range orientated east-west, is made up of a sedimentary-volcanic assemblage, known as the Blouberg Formation, and forms part of the Waterberg Group. It is divided into seven sedimentary members and a volcanic member at the top. In some places the Mogalakwena conglomerate is found (Brandl 1986:24).

The vegetation on the plain surrounding Blouberg/Makgabeng is dominated by Mixed Bushveld, in contrast to the foot and slope of the mountain that is dominated by Sourish Mixed Bushveld and Sour Bushveld. The vegetation at Makgabeng is also Sourish Mixed Bushveld (Acocks 1975). The Early Iron Age sites identified are usually located on the crossover from Mixed Bushveld to Sourish Mixed Bushveld.

Large areas of the slope of the mountain have been denuded of vegetation, giving rise to erosion and secondary growth, such as "sekelbos" (*Dichrostachys cinerea*). These factors contribute to the site being exposed and therefore prone to erosion. A number of erosion channels cut through the site. This is largely the case with the top (up-slope) part of the site while at the lower part, where there is still some vegetation left, the erosion is less. This makes the detection of the various features all the more difficult. The site is further endangered by a road for a new school.

The site under discussion is located in the opening of a big valley on the farm Beauley 260LR (2328BB - Addney), at the southern foot of Blouberg (Fig. 1). It is situated approximately 200 metres east of the Bosehla River. A number of smaller dongas demarcate the site on the southwestern, southern and southeastern sides. In terms of Early Iron Age settlement preferences, this site offers an ideal location. Maggs (1984:199) indicates similar areas being preferred by Early Iron Age settlers in the KwaZulu Natal area.

Several concentrations of daga were found scattered over the site (Fig. 2). These are taken either as fallen down huts or granary structures. In some cases the pieces of daga are quite thick (up to 150 mm for the thickest pieces). They show impressions of sticks on one side and are smooth on the other. Removal of the daga revealed clay floors below in excavation 1 and 5, though not in excavation 3. The floors were thin, 2 to 3 cm thick, and were laid down directly on the ground.

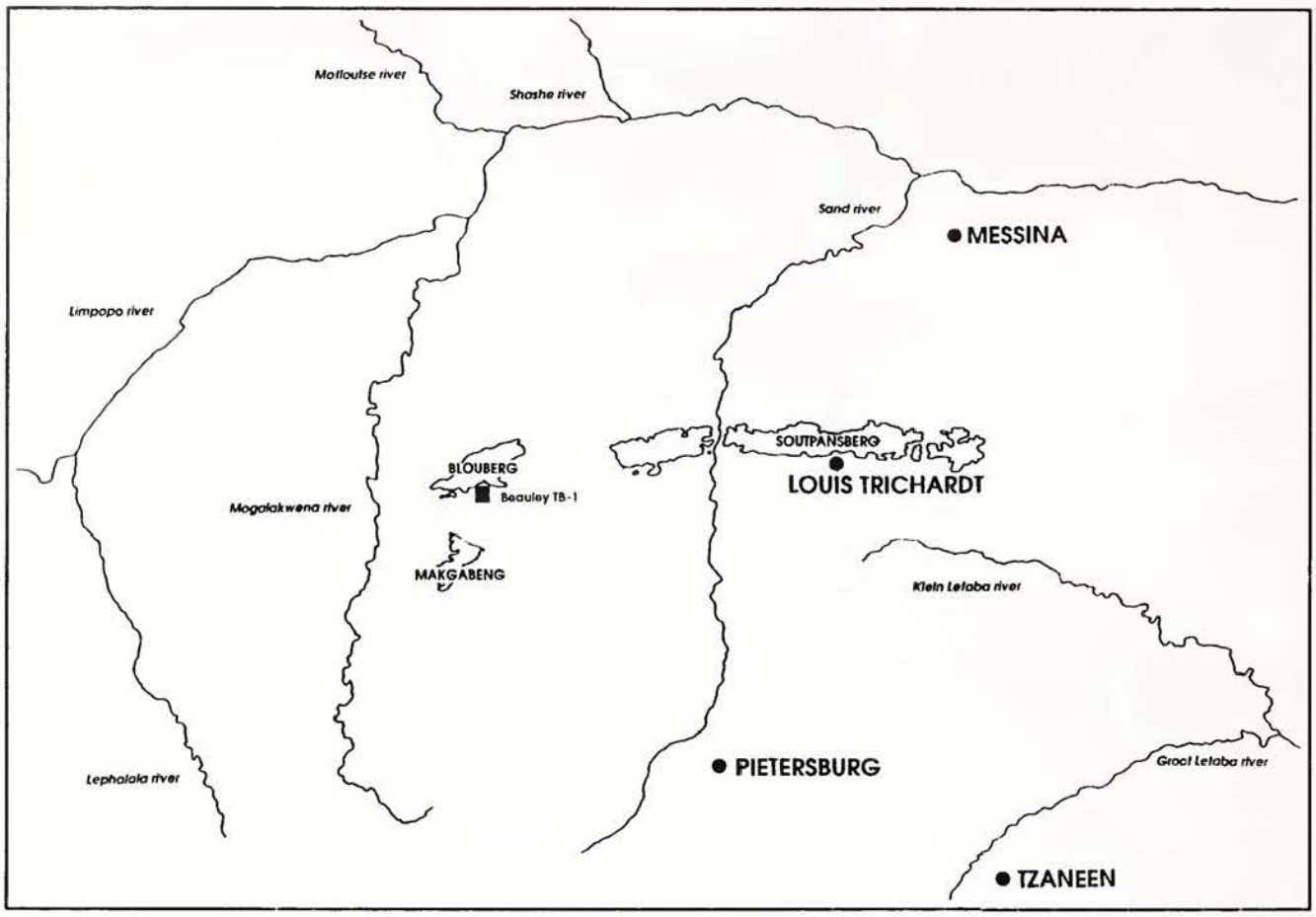

Fig. 1. Map of a section of Northern Province, showing the location of the site under discussion.

Some small concentrations of non-descript daga heaps and piles of stones also occur over the site. These were all plotted, but, due to erosion, it is not always possible to establish the exact size of these features with the result that it is impossible to determine their original function. The absence of a floor below the daga in these cases seems to indicate that they might have been small granaries. The pile of stones might have been the base for the granary. A platform of sticks is laid over this, and is then covered with mud, accounting for the similarity between the daga found here, with that on the larger concentrations.

THE EXCAVATION

This site covers roughly 200 x 150 m (Fig. 2). It was decided to lay out a grid of 2 x 2 m squares. In all, five blocks were excavated.

The floor excavations

In Excavation 1 (TB1/1 - M10) a 2 x 4 m block was laid out over a concentration of hut daga. Removal of the daga revealed the remains of a thin clay floor. It was in such a bad state of preservation that it was impossible to determine its size. Only a few rather small potsherds were found, and it was decided to move the excavation lower down the slope to where the chances of the deposit being retained were better because of more vegetation.

A block of 3 x 4 m was set out over a concentration of daga for Excavation 3 (TB1/3 - D49). No floor was found, but below the daga a shallow pit, 1,03 m in diameter, produced a large number of pots (Fig. 3). In fact, the better part of the pottery assemblage was found here. The relationship of the daga to the pit is still unclear.

Excavation 5 (TB1/5 - Ee51) was a 2 x 4 m square over a concentration of hut daga on a thin floor. The diameter of the existing part of this floor was 1,35 m. Apart from some ceramics and pieces of tuyères found on the floor, two pieces of pole were found protruding through the floor. These were identified as hut poles and one has been dated to AD 962. In one section of the floor, a shallow depression with a raised clay rim occurs. This is approximately 30 cm in diameter and it presumably was a hearth. As the floor was not complete, it is impossible to give an indication of its location relative to the rest of the structure.

Midden excavations

On the basis of some large pieces of shaped clay found in the immediate vicinity, the occurrence of a smelting furnace was suspected here. Excavation 2 (TB1/2-W38) was a 2 m x 4 m block that was excavated in 10 cm layers. A large number of potsherds, pieces of tuyère and slag were found. A deep pit was found in the southeastern corner of the excavation. It contained soil with what appears to be a very high ash content. The pit

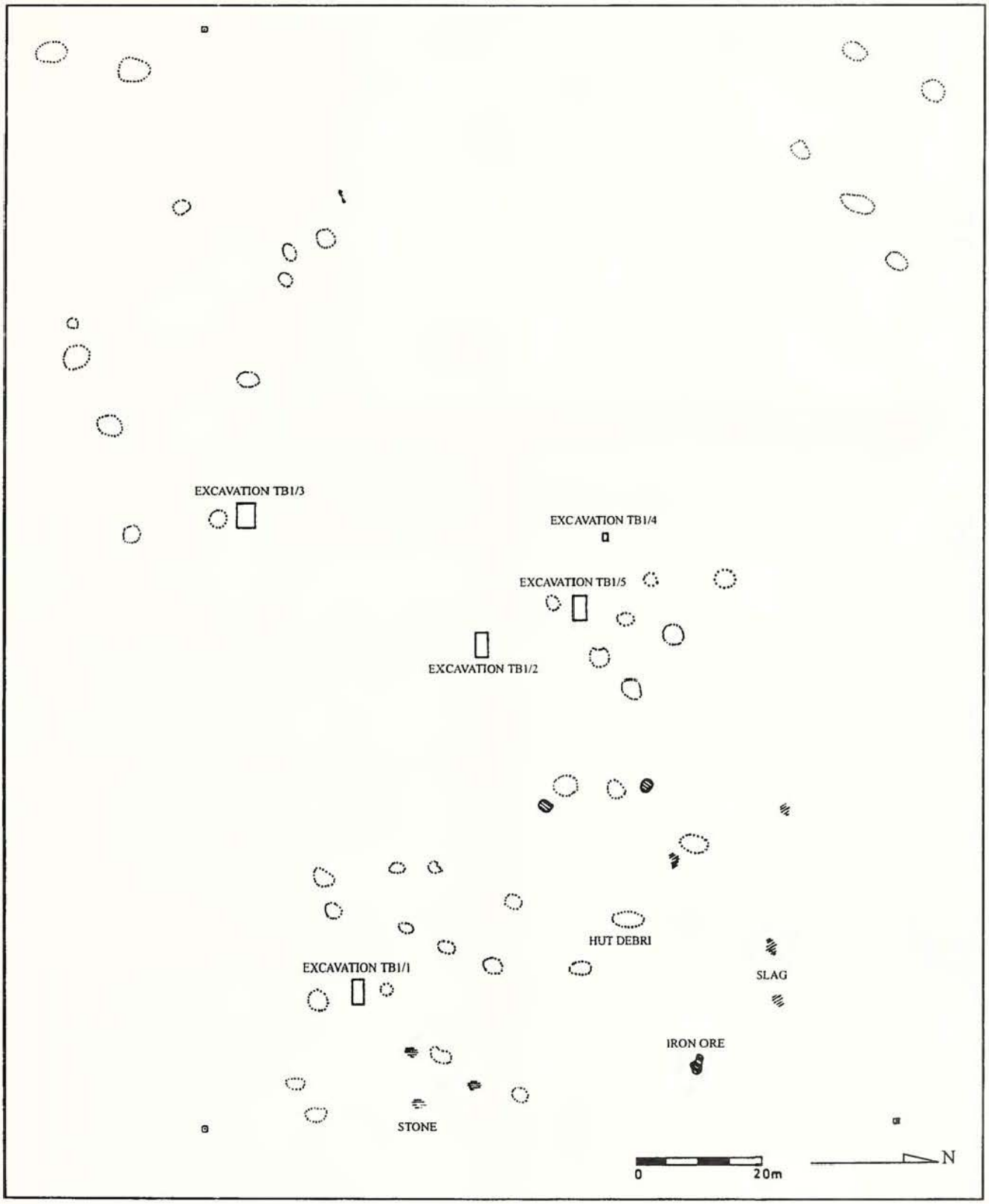

Fig. 2. Map of the site of Beauley (TB1).

pit reached a depth of 49 cm below the current surface.

Two pots were protruding from the ground and were treated as Excavation 4 (TB1/4). As no other features could be detected, the pots were excavated in a 1 x 1 m square block to establish context. None was found, except for their position relative to other features.

THE FINDS

Pottery

A large number of potsherds were found. Most of the surface material was too fragmented to be of use in the analysis. Some of the surface material shows Moloko

Fig. 3. Excavating a concentration of daga, revealing some pottery below it.

characteristics similar to those found at Icon (Hanisch 1979). These were discarded for purposes of analysis, however.

The pottery was analysed according to procedures proposed by Huffman (1980), but not strictly adhered to. In these procedures, multidimensional types are formed by using different independent variables: decoration layout, decoration and vessel profile.

After reconstruction, it was possible to identify 43 different vessels, six of which do not have any decoration. A further four shards could be allocated to probable classes on the basis of decoration motifs alone, bringing the total number of decorated vessels to 47. Some of the pottery has a very weathered and brittle texture, with a pitted surface.

Incision was the only decorating technique employed. The most common motifs are bands of incised lines and cross hatching on the lip and shoulder of the pots. It was possible to group the area of decorations into three main groups:

Area 1: decoration on the lip or immediately below the lip.
Area 2: decoration on the neck.
Area 3: decoration on the shoulder.

Layouts were defined by combination of decoration areas and five modes were identified:

Layout 1 - Decoration area 1.
Layout 2 - Decoration area 2.
Layout 3 - Decoration area 3.
Layout 4 - Decoration area 1 & 3.
Layout 5 - Decoration area 1, 2 & 3.

Five basic profile shapes were recognised in the Beauley assemblage:

1. pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder.
2. pot with an everted neck and a shoulder that is well defined.
3. pot with a straight neck.
4. beaker with near vertical sides and round base.
5. incurved bowl.

The intersection of profile and layout modes produced a possibility of 75 classes, of which nine are represented. The following classes were identified:

1. Pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim, motifs on the neck, followed by a band on the shoulder (2 - Fig. 4:3).
2. Pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim, and a band of decoration on the shoulder (19 - Fig. 5:2, 5).
3. Pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim (4 - Fig. 4:4; 5:1, 4).
4. Pot with an everted neck and a shoulder that is well defined, with a band of decoration on the neck (1 - Fig. 4:2).
5. Pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on the shoulder (1).
6. Pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder, with a band of decoration on the neck (1 - Fig. 4:5).
7. Pot with a straight neck and a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim (4 - Fig. 5:3).
8 Beaker with near vertical sides and round base, with a band of decoration below the rim (4 - Fig. 4:1).
9. Incurved bowl with a band of decoration on or immediately below the rim (1).

To these I have added four undecorated classes:

10. Pot with an everted neck and a rounded shoulder (1).
11. Pot with a straight neck and poorly defined shoulder (3).
12. Open bowl (1).
13. Incurved bowl (1).

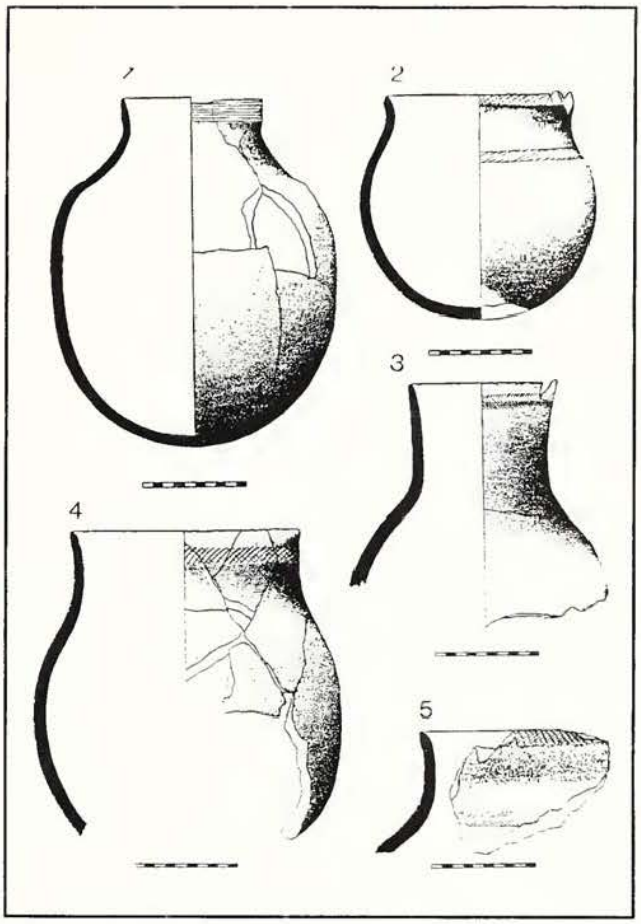

Fig. 4. Ceramic classes from Beauley: Class 1:3; Class 3:4; Class 4:2; Class 6:5; Class 8:1.

The data shows that the most characteristic vessels are from class 2, with classes 6, 7 and 8 as the second most numerous classes. Based on the analysis, the Beauley assemblage shows a resemblance to the ceramic from Klingbeil in the Lydenburg area (see Evers 1980).

Iron smelting

Large quantities of slag occur in three concentrations on the northeastern side of the site. More centrally situated, two concentrations of ore (magnetite) were identified. However, unlike Whitelaw (1994:41), it was impossible to determine the significance of the position of these areas within the larger sites, as the position of the cattle byre could not be determined.

Pieces of tuyères were recovered in the excavations as well as on the surface of the site. They were fractured, however, and no measurement could be derived from them. The tuyères occur in large enough quantities to indicate that they were made and used on the site.

Faunal remains

Only a few fragmented and brittle pieces of bone were excavated. None of these have any identifying features. The lack of faunal material is, for the larger part, attributed to the acidic soil, though the working of other factors is not excluded.

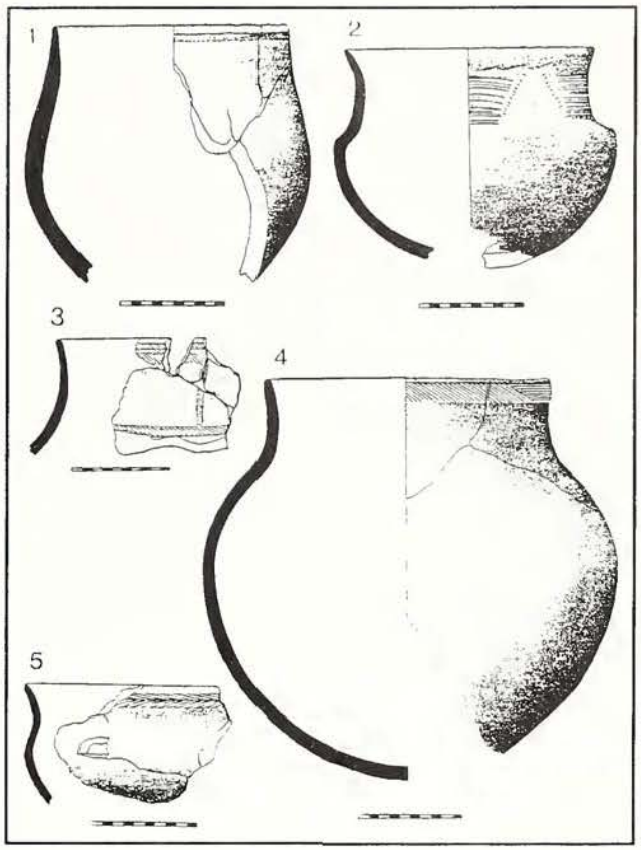

Fig. 5. Ceramic classes from Beauley: Class 2:2, 5; Class 3:1, 4; Class 7:3.

Beads

Four ostrich eggshell beads and two shell beads were found, all of which came from excavation TB1/2. They vary between 7,4 mm and 9,0 mm in diameter.

One big copper bead (10,6 mm diameter) was found on the surface of the up-slope part of the site. However, being a surface find, its relationship with the site, if any, is unknown.

Worked stone

Two pieces of soapstone were found on the surface, both of which are smooth and bear crossed incised lines. These might have been ornaments of some kind as their inner diameters (approximately 10 mm) are too small to have been part of a pipe for smoking.

A small, shaped, flat piece of stone was found. Unfortunately, it was broken and not all the pieces were retrieved. In shape, it looks like contemporary pieces that are used in shaping and burnishing pottery. In fact, it was found in TB1/3 among a large number of broken pots.

Some MSA and LSA flakes and tools occur on the site. However, no conscious effort was made to collect these and only the ones retrieved by archaeological methods were kept.

DISCUSSION

Two types of structures could be identified at Beauley: huts and granaries. The size of the structures is not clear,

but it had well-defined floors, with walls consisting of poles plastered with clay. Some additional features, such as hearths and pits, were uncovered. Presumably the pits might have been storage pits of some kind, possibly for grain. Whitelaw (1993:75) reports similar features from Nanda in KwaZulu-Natal, and Huffman (1990a) from Broederstroom west of Pretoria. It is interesting to note that in the past the local people (Hananwa) also dug pits in the cattle byre in which grain baskets were put (Moifatswane 1993).

An indication of activity areas and their possible relationship to each other can be derived from the plan drawing (Fig. 2). There seems to be a definite clustering of structures in at least three different areas on the site. In each of these, the size variation of the remains might be an indication of different functions for the structures. The larger structures might be huts, with a number of smaller ones, possibly granaries, arranged close to them.

Features relating to iron working are found more to the northern side of the site, though the remains of what were possibly a furnace have been located more to the centre of the site. The iron ore, slag, tuyères and pieces of furnace found on the site seem to indicate that iron was produced here. This fits in with what was found at Early Iron Age sites in Natal (*eg*, Maggs 1984, 1992). Huffman (1990a:7) however, argues that iron smelting was surrounded by ritual prohibitions and therefore would not have been located within the settlement. Being a very large site, this could well have been the case, if the whole site was not inhabited over the same period.

An analysis of the pottery places this site in the Early Iron Age. The dating and ceramic style indicate that the Beauley site is contemporary with Klingbeil sites in the Lydenburg area. Klingbeil eventually seems to develop into the K2 tradition. Charcoal from the excavation was submitted to the CSIR in Pretoria and yielded the following results. Charcoal from TB1/2, close to some slag and pieces of tuyères, 1120 $\pm$ 50 BP (Pta-5948); part of a wooden post sticking through the clay floor in TB1/5, 1135 $\pm$ 50 BP (Pta-5951); and charcoal from TB1/3 gave a date of 850 $\pm$ 50 BP (Pta-5947). These are calibrated, respectively to, TB1/2 - AD 902(976)1003; TB1/5 - AD 917(962)976; and TB1/3 - AD 1188(1237) 1262, with the central intercept in brackets.

The excavations at Beauley confirm much of what is already known about the Early Iron Age in other parts of the country. However, the site is important as it fills the spatial and temporal gap between the sites in the Soutpansberg, the Limpopo valley and those in the Waterberg.

It is clear that further excavation is necessary on the site. The biggest problem to date is obtaining a larger pottery assemblage. Secondly, more information on the precise type and arrangement of structures at the site is needed. Thirdly, it will also be necessary to compare the site to other sites found recently in other areas of Blouberg.

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