

MATERIAL CULTURE 'UNDER THE ANIMAL SKIN': EXCAVATIONS AT ESIKHUNJINI, A MFECANE PERIOD NDZUNDZA NDEBELE SITE*

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ABSTRACT

Esikhunjini is a mfecane period Ndzundza Ndebele site in the Steelpoort River valley in Mpumalanga. Excavations at the site focused on sampling identity related material culture: settlement layout, houseform, middens and ceramics. The analysis highlighted the range of effects this period of conflict had on different types of Ndzundza material culture.

INTRODUCTION

Esikhunjini is an extensive site located on the north-eastern slopes of the Bothasberg in the Steelpoort River valley, Mpumalanga (Fig. 1). The examined section of the site is located half way up the slope and is approximately ten kilometres from the Steelpoort River. The settlement has been built on natural ledges, which have been expanded to accommodate the occupation. The hillside below the site is extensively terraced. These terraces pre-date the Esikhunjini occupation, possibly dating to the KwaMaza period and are presumably agricultural.

Obviously, the Esikhunjini settlement dates from before the occupation of the area by colonists and consequently it was not documented in writing. However, when Fourie (1921) was recording Ndzundza oral histories, there still could have been elders who, as children, were part of the occupation at the site, or whose parents had lived there and pointed it out to them.

C.J. Van Vuuren was taken to Esikhunjini in 1979 by informants. The name Esikhunjini translates as "under the animal skin" (place under cover), alluding to the defensive position of the site and the shelter it provided during the turmoil of the mfecane. While the name does not appear in a specific isibongo, it reoccurs numerous times in oral history testimonies (Van Vuuren & Schoeman 1996).

Recorded oral traditions state that after the final destruction of KwaMaza by Mzilikazi in the early 1820s, Siboko (the last leader at KwaMaza) was succeeded by his brother Somdeyi. Under his leadership the Ndzundza eventually returned to the Bothasberg and settled at

Esikhunjini. However, the departure of Mzilikazi did not signal regional peace, and this is reflected in the defensive hill-slope location of Esikhunjini. Subsequently, the settlement was attacked, burnt down and Somdeyi was abducted and presumably killed (Fourie 1921:38-9). Different sources contain contradictory information on Esikhunjini's attackers. One Ndzundza oral account states that it was forces led by Mzilikazi, while another states that it was the Swazi army. Pedi oral history (Hunt 1931:284) records a Pedi attack on the Ndzundza at this time.

The power of place is evident in the current Ndzundza relationship with Esikhunjini. While I was excavating the site in 1994, during a period of drought, several members of the Ndzundza royal family visited the site to pray for rain. During discussions, the elders pointed out that the site holds power, because it is where some of their ancestors lived and are buried. Through them they pray for rain. Furthermore, the current farm owner recalls that numerous male initiation schools have been held at the site.

ARCHAEOLOGY

The examined section of the site consists of three stone walled homesteads. These are interlinked and in close proximity to one another. They have been named Homestead 1, Homestead 2 and Homestead 3 (Fig. 2). The rest of the site is located immediately downslope. The highest portion of the settlement was chosen for study, as this high status position (*cf.* Kuper 1980:17-18) is comparable to that of KwaMaza A and B, on the previous site in the sequence (Schoeman 1998).

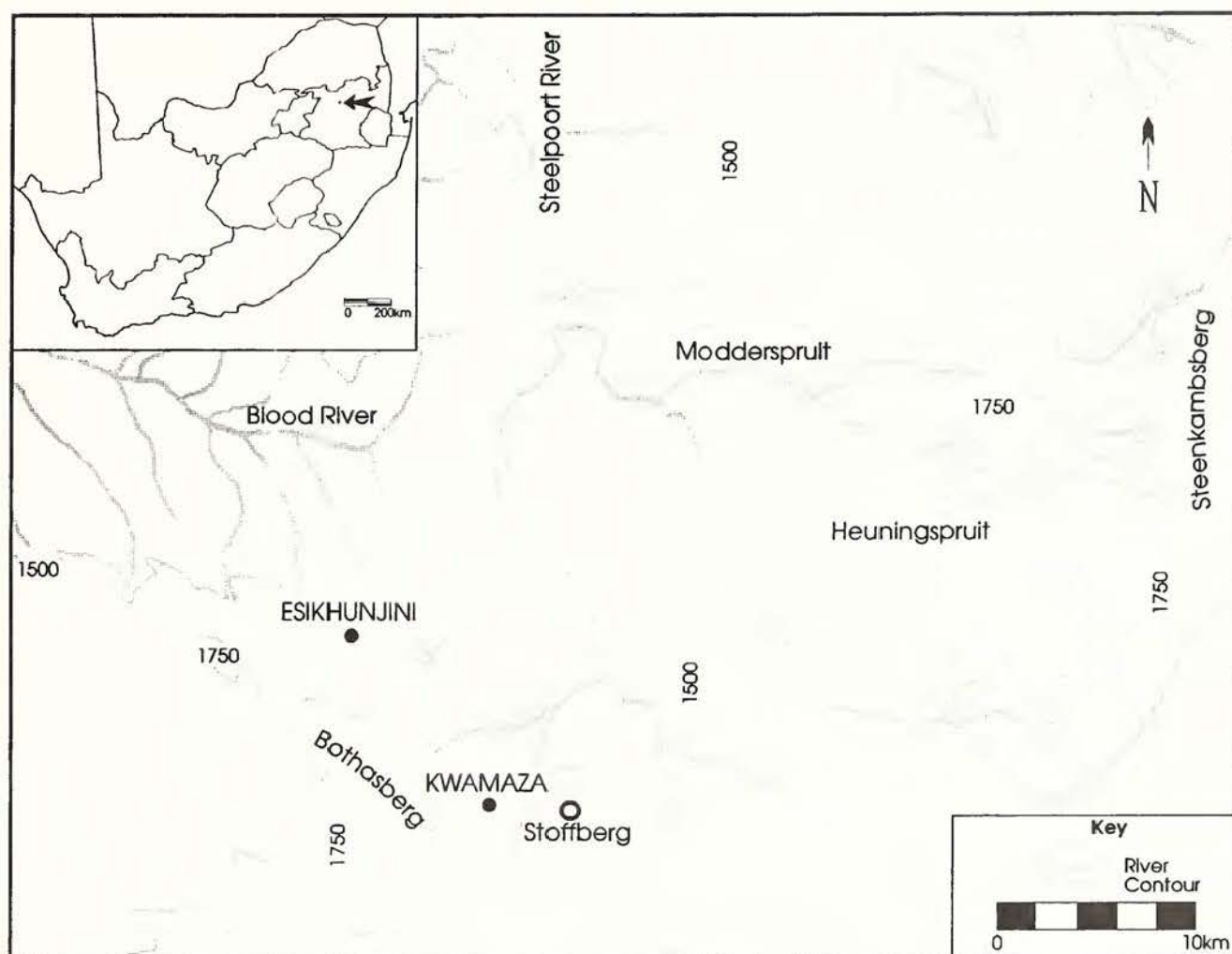


Fig. 1. Map of a section of the Steelpoort River Valley, showing the location of the site under discussion.

Homesteads 1, 2 and 3 were mapped, and excavations sampled kraals, domestic areas and middens.

FEATURES

Enclosures and Terracing

The three homesteads examined at Esikhunjini are distinguished by each having its own centrally located stone walled enclosure. These are similar in their layouts, consisting of two compartments; the larger upslope from the smaller (Fig. 2). Secondary enclosures were built into the walls of the Homestead 1 and 3 upper compartments. The central enclosure at Homestead 2 (has no structures within the its walls) is also substantially larger than those at Homesteads 1 and 3.

The relationship between the enclosures and the surrounding domestic areas is constrained by the slope gradient. At Homestead 1 and 3 both areas are restricted to a single terrace. The fronts of these homesteads drop off sharply down steep slopes.

The situation at Homestead 2 is different. Here the central stonewalled enclosure and residential zone are located at two different heights. The enclosure has been

built within a natural bowl, below a terrace upon which the domestic area is located. In turn, this area of Homestead 2 is higher than the levels upon which Homesteads 1 and 3 are built.

Homestead 1

The 1,50 m high stone wall of the Homestead 1 central enclosure has collapsed in parts. It has a 10m diameter lower, and a larger upper compartment 18m in diameter, which has two secondary enclosures located in the left¹ and one in the right hand wall. A semi-circular stone wall joins the southern outer wall (Fig. 2).

Due to wall collapse, entrances couldn't be identified. The similarity in layouts between Homestead 1 and 3, however, suggests that there would have been entrances leading from the smaller enclosures into the upper compartment, as well as external access ways through the top and right hand walls (Fig. 2).

In Homestead 1 three circular, smaller stone wall structures are located south-west of the central enclosure. The first, 4,8 m in diameter, faces north east (Fig. 2: HIS1). The second, 9,50 m diameter, has a downslope facing entrance and a smaller, secondary enclosure built

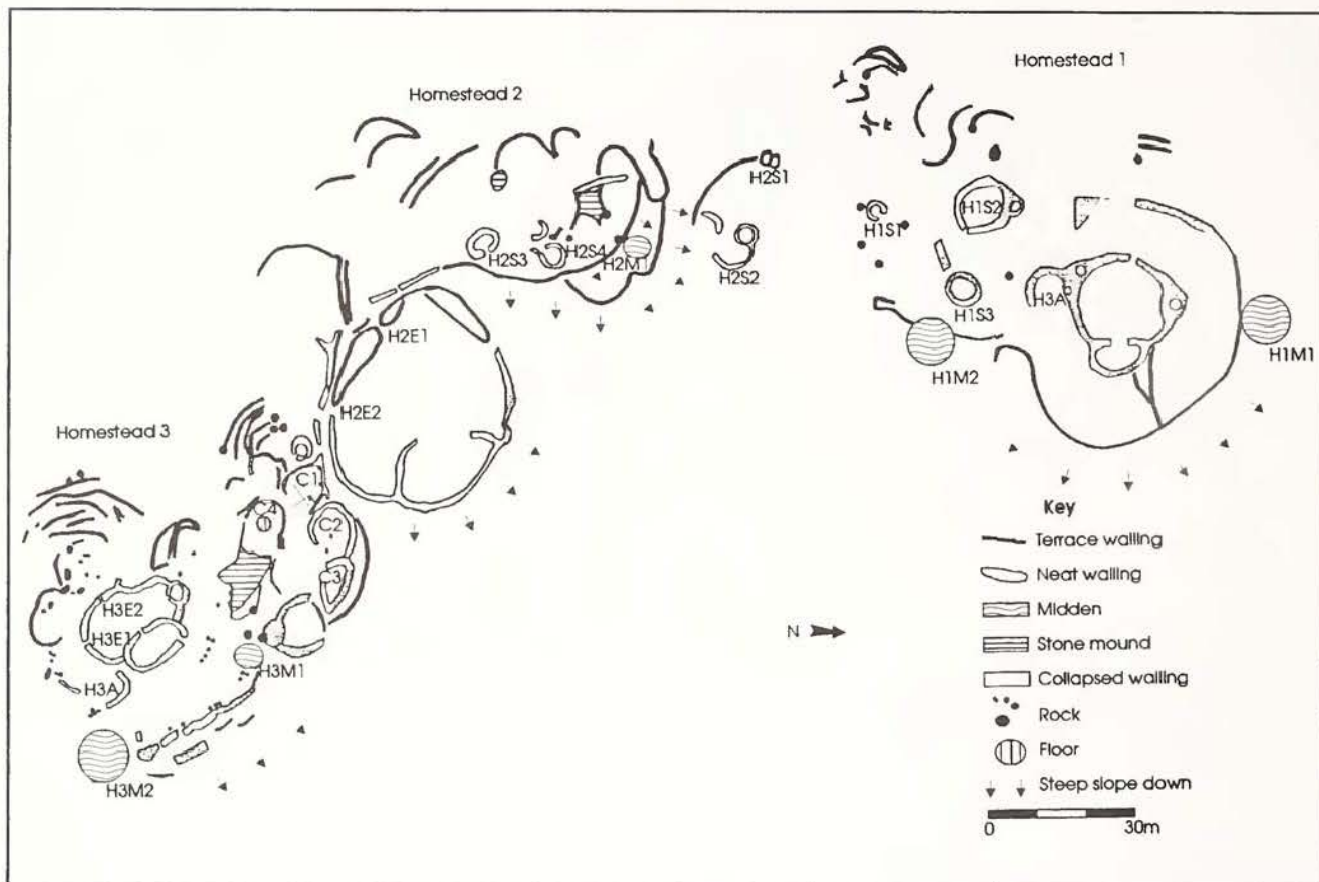


Fig. 2. Settlement plan of the Esikhunjini site Homesteads 1, 2 and 3 .

into the right hand wall, connected to it through a low (0,50 m) access way, covered by a lintel (Fig. 2:H1S2). The entrance to the third structure, associated with a 10m long and 0,55 m high stone wall, could not be located due to wall collapse (Fig. 2:H1S3).

The downslope edge of Homestead 1 is marked by a sharp drop-off. Low one-stone-high ridges radiate out from the central enclosure to the edge of this terrace, and may indicate household space. A number of terraced bays are located upslope from the stone walled structures, also demarcating domestic zones.

A 1x2 m trench was excavated in the upper compartment of the central enclosure at Homestead 1. The purpose of this excavation was twofold. The first was simply to sample for dung and the second was to investigate a distinct step running north-south across the enclosure. No dung was found and excavation showed the step to be natural.

Homestead 2

The stonewalled Homestead 2 central enclosure consists of two compartments; a 22 m diameter lower and an upper, 38 m at its maximum diameter (Fig. 2). There are two external entrances leading out of the upper compartment, one on the right (Fig. 2:H2E1) and one at the top leading onto the much higher domestic terrace (Fig. 2:H2E2). Two round bi-lobial circular enclosures are located upslope, to the north-west of the central

enclosure (Fig. 2:H2S1 & H2S2).

On the terrace above the assembly area there are two small stone structures, the entrance of the one faces north-east (Fig. 2: H2S3) and the other is accessed from the south-west (Fig. 2:H2S4). Additionally, there is a small semi-circular stone wall and a low stone wall 12m in length. In proximity to these there are a number of large smoothed boulders, which seem to have been used as 'benches'. At the back of the terrace there are a number of bays dug into the hill (Fig. 2).

Homestead 3

As in Homesteads 1 and 2, the Homestead 3 central enclosure is bi-lobial. The maximum diameter of the lower compartment is 11 m and that of the upper one is 19,5 m. It has a smaller enclosure within the left hand wall. There are two external access points into the structure, the larger one is located in the right hand wall and the smaller entrance is situated at the top of the enclosure. A semi-circular wall was built to the right of the main enclosure (Fig. 2).

The central enclosure is surrounded by domestic space, this is located in front, on the left and at the back on terraced bays excavated into the hill. The residential areas are placed on the same terrace level as the kraal. The front of the homestead, facing downslope, is defined by a low stone wall, with several discrete entrances, each granting access to individual households.

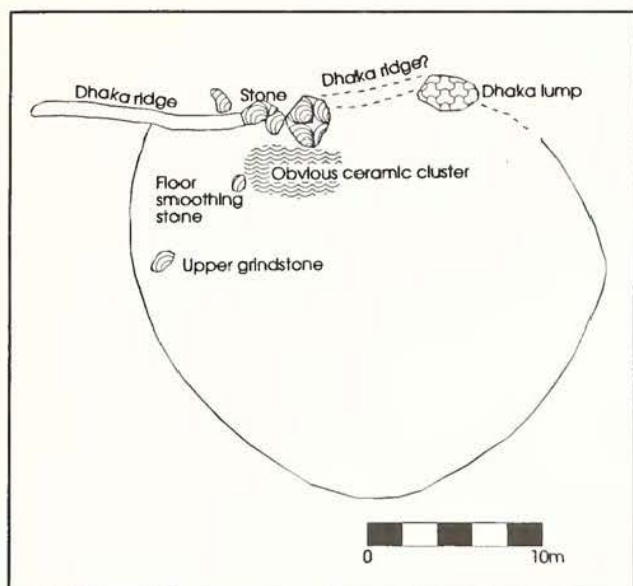


Fig. 3. Plan showing the Esikhunjini Homestead 3 Courtyard 4 House Floor.

House Form

Four areas were excavated in an attempt to find house floors. Two trenches were dug in Homestead 3. The first (2x10 m) one in Courtyard 1 was 0,10 m deep. This uncovered a small circle of stone, surrounded by charcoal post remains, on the left hand side of the courtyard. These remains could be from a grain bin. On the right hand side a lower and upper grindstone were recovered. No house remains were found (Fig. 2:C1).

A 2x12 m trench was initially excavated into Courtyard 4 in Homestead 3 (Fig. 2:C4). This uncovered a circle of single stones 8,70 m in diameter. Excavation within this stone circle revealed a preserved baked clay (dhaka) floor, 2,95 m in diameter. This floor had a preserved ridge at the front (Fig. 3). Dhaka lumps (smoothly plastered on one side, pole impressed in the middle and grass impressed on the other), as well as charcoal and burnt thatch were found in the rubble overlaying the floor. A small ring of stone was located next to the floor on the left hand side of the courtyard.

Two 1x1 m squares were excavated in Homestead 3, Courtyard 2 (Fig. 2:C2). The surface 0,03 m consisted of a dark red-brown deposit, while the next 0,17 m was a uniform red soil. The excavation revealed no dhaka or other indications of house remains. Additionally a 2x1 m test trench was excavated, into the terrace above the assembly area in Homestead 2, in order to locate other floors. The excavation was 0,20 m deep and consisted of a sterile uniform hard red rocky soil. It yielded no evidence of house remains. A 1x1 m test square, in what appeared to be a back courtyard of the domestic terrace of Homestead 2, produced nothing other than uniform hard red sterile earth.

Middens

The middens at Esikhunjini were difficult to identify, since they are relatively shallow. Furthermore, they formed near the front entrances of the homesteads and, consequently, were distributed down sharp slopes. All revealed similar stratigraphy; consisting of alternating layers of ash and relatively sterile red soils. Three were excavated, two associated with Homestead 3 and one associated with Homestead 2.

Five square metres were excavated in Homestead 2 Midden 1. This midden was located on a steep slope below a house-terrace (Fig. 2:H2M1). The depth varied, but the deepest section of the trench was 0,73 m. The top deposit (Surface) consisted of red-brown wash. The second, Ash 1, was confined to the northern part of the excavation. Below this was a larger ash layer (Ash 2) rich in cultural material. The fourth (Dark Red) and fifth (Red) deposits consisted of artefact poor dark red and red soil respectively. The sixth layer consisted of an ashy artefact rich deposit (Ash 3). The last stratum, Red 2 lay on bed rock (Fig. 4).

Red 2 was dated (Wits 2408), using C14, to 1760 ± 70 . This calibrates to AD 1656, AD 1738, AD 1810 or AD 1945.

Five square metres were excavated into Homestead 3 Midden 1 (Fig. 2:H3M1). The depth of the deposit varied due to the slope of the midden. The midden was covered by a thick red-brown deposit (Surface), the depth ranging between 0,10 m and 0,21 m. The second to fourth layers (Ash 1, Ash 2, Ash 3 and Ash 4) were artefact rich, ashy deposits. There had been some disturbance due to rodent burrowing and termite activity (Fig. 5).

Radiocarbon was used to date Ash 2 0,1 - 0,2 m. It dated (Wits 2409) to 1920 ± 70 , which calibrated to AD 1689, AD 1732, AD 1812 and AD 1934.

Two 1x1 m squares were excavated in Homestead 3 Midden 2 (Fig. 2:H3M2). The depth of the midden was uniform at about 0,40 m. The midden was covered with a grey-brown deposit (Surface). The second layer (Ash 1) was artefact rich. White Ash overlay Red, which was artefact poor in relation to the other layers. Ash 2 consisted of a rich ashy patch. It was underlain in turn by Grey Ash which contained an abundance of charcoal and was rich in fired wall dhaka. Ash 3 covered bed rock (Fig. 6).

Grey Ash was dated (Wits 2410) to $AD 1770 \pm 70$, using C14. This date calibrates to AD 1689, AD 1733, AD 1813 and AD 1937.

The basal deposits of the Homestead 3 middens resembles 'clean up' for occupation layers, as they contain large amounts of charcoal and house rubble.

The lowest possible layer from all three middens has been radiocarbon dated. All radiocarbon dates are of limited value, given that the site can be dated more accurately through the oral records. Oral accounts and the presence of glass trade beads indicate that the early nineteenth century calibrations are the correct dates.

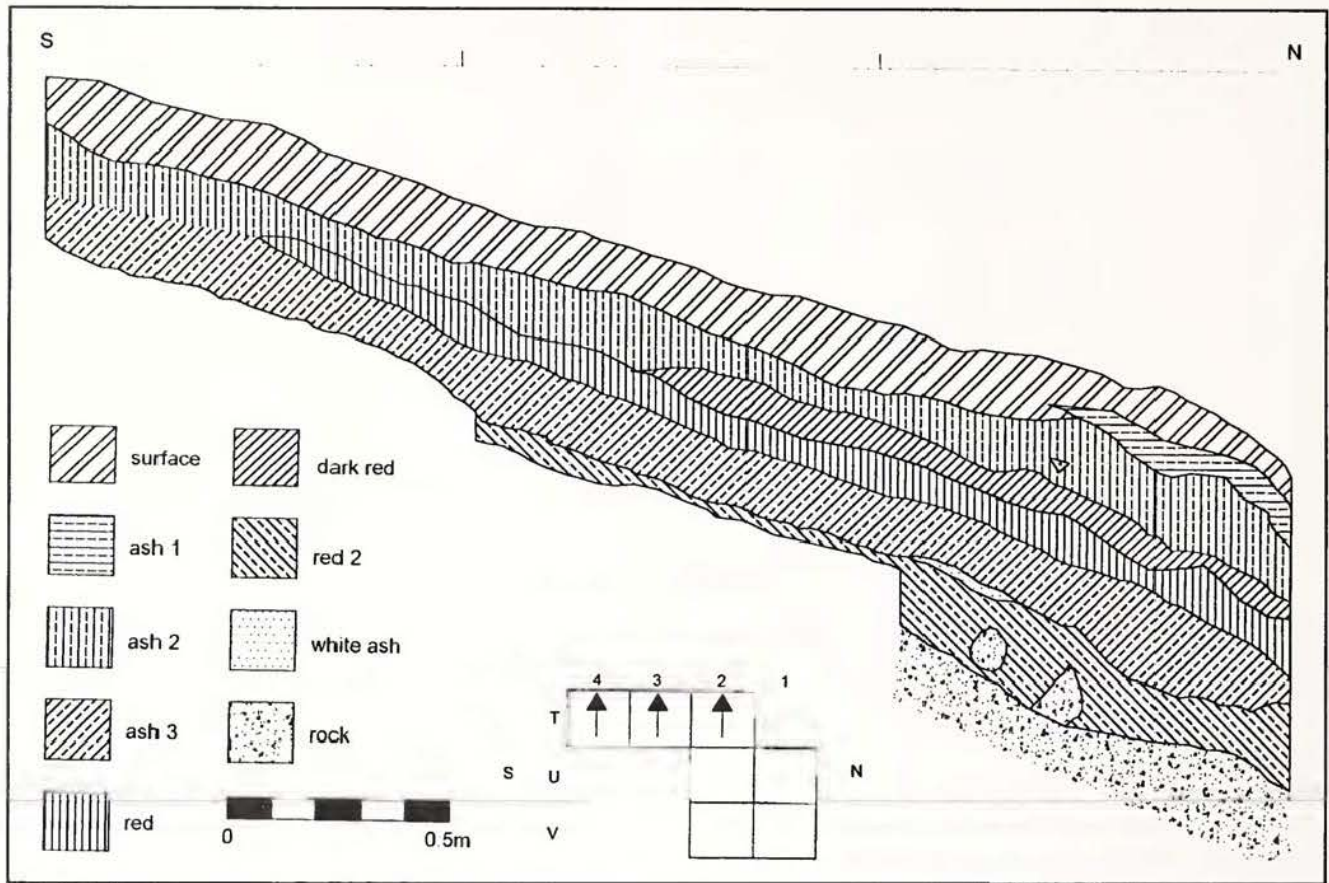


Fig. 4. Section drawing of the Esikhunjini Homestead 2 Midden 1 West profile.

THE FINDS

Ceramics

Out of a total of 1150 ceramic sherds recovered from the excavations, only 64 (5,6%) were decorated. One hundred and thirty-nine of the total sample (12,1%) were rim or neck fragments. Of these 129 (92,8%) were from jars, and 27 (20,9%) of the jar pieces were decorated. Ten (8,7%) came from undecorated bowls.

Not all of the decorated sherds could be allocated to classes, due to their small size. On the basis of motifs, 7 could be assigned to the Eiland phase of the Early Iron Age. Two other sherds originate from another even Earlier phase of the Early Iron Age and one was, possibly from a Letaba vessel (Fig. 7). The rest of the assemblage consisted of Late Iron Age ceramics. The following ceramic types were present:

- Type 1: recurved jar with a band of decoration on the rim (1 sherd);
- Type 2: recurved jar with a band of decoration in the neck (sherds);
- Type 3: recurved jar with a band of decoration on the lip (1 sherd) (Fig. 8);
- Type 4: recurved jar with a band of oblique incision on the rim, graphite below that, an arcade incised on the shoulder, the body covered with ochre

and the inside of the rim covered in ochre (5 sherds) (Fig. 9).

The Type 1, 2 and 3 were coarsely made, whereas the Type 4 ceramics were thinner and neatly made.

Other finds

The other finds are tabulated below:

Homestead 2 Midden 1

- Surface: 1 piece of ostrich egg shell
- Ash 1: 7 ostrich egg shell pieces
1 dark blue glass bead
1 wound copper spiral
2 copper beads
- Ash 2: 1 wound copper spiral
- Red 2: 1 white glass bead

Homestead 3 Midden 1

- Surface: 1 sky blue glass bead
1 white glass bead
- Ash 1: 1 iron spear-head (Fig. 10)

Homestead 3 Midden 2

- Ash 1: 1 unidentifiable broken clay figurine fragment
1 white glass bead
1 blue glass bead

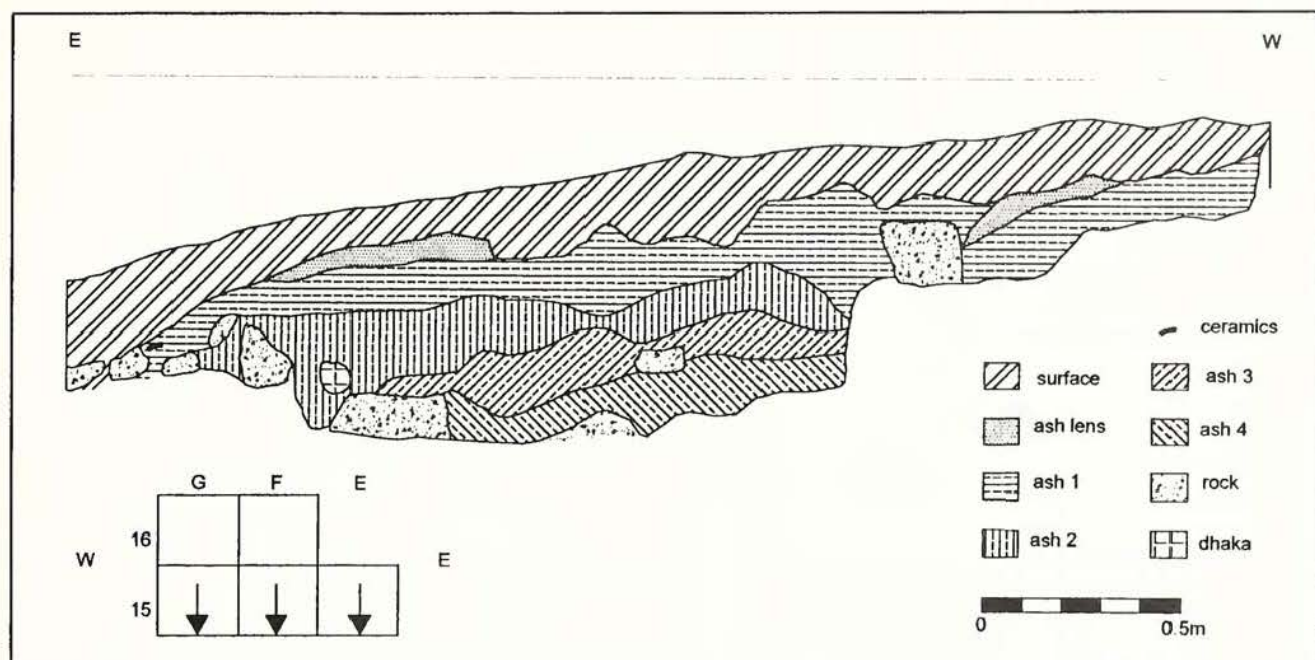


Fig. 5. Section drawing of the Esikhunjini Homestead 3 Midden 1 South profile.

Red: clump of molten glass beads

White Ash: 1 white glass bead
2 red glass beads
1 blue glass bead

Grey Ash: clump of molten silica

Homestead 3 Courtyard 1: 1 upper grindstone
1 lower grindstone

Homestead 3 Courtyard 4: 1 upper grindstone

Plant remains

Carbonized millet was found in Homestead 3 Midden 1 Dark Red and Ash 2. Carbonized sorghum was found in Homestead 3 Midden 1 Ash 3, Homestead 3 Midden 2 Ash 1 and White Ash. Three carbonized maize cobs were found in Homestead 3 Midden 1 Ash 1.

This is the first direct evidence for maize in the area, although this discovery was not unexpected, since Esikhunjini dates to the 1820s, and maize was introduced into the interior at some time in the eighteenth century (Hall 1995:312).

DISCUSSION

The central enclosure at Homestead 2 has been identified as an assembly area for a number of reasons. Its position below the senior homestead is identical to that of the assembly area at KwaMaza (Schoeman 1998:48). Furthermore, there are no cattle tracks leading into the area, and the enclosure is not closed at the top, although the terrace upslope could have functioned as a barrier.

The central enclosures in Homesteads 1 and 3 functioned as cattle kraals. This is indicated by their central location within the homesteads which is consistent

with the ethnography (*cf.* van Vuuren 1980:44). Secondly, the location of stone wall cattle tracks leading to Homestead 3 is congruous with directing animals into these enclosures. These kraals are also completely enclosed, with entrances at the top and in the right hand wall of the upper compartments. The different width of the entrances into the kraal at Homestead 3, suggests that the narrower upslope entry point (Fig. 2:H3E1) was for human use, while the right, wider access way (Fig. 2:H3E2) was for cattle.

The semi-circular wall located to the right of the Homestead 1 and 3 kraals could have functioned as male assembly areas or courts (*ibandla*) for these individual homesteads. This interpretation is supported by the location of these areas on the right (*ubene*) hand side, since, in contemporary Ndzundza practise the homestead *ibandla*, normally a stone walled semi-circle, is always located on the *ubene* side of the kraal (Van Vuuren 1980:146; W. Mahlangu, pers. comm.).

It is likely that the smaller secondary enclosures in the kraal walls were used to house calves, as this would be consistent with Ndzundza ethnography (Van Vuuren 1980:148).

The smaller stone enclosures, scattered around the site, were probably used to house small stock. This is suggested by the low linteled entrance linking the compartments in one of the enclosures (Fig. 2: H1S2) at Homestead 1 as well as ethnographic accounts (Van Vuuren 1980:149).

In spite of its defensive location, and the spatial constraints this introduced, the Esikhunjini settlement layout shows a number of marked similarities to that of KwaMaza, the previous site in the Ndzundza Steelpoort River valley sequence (Schoeman 1998). First, this can be seen in the layout of the central enclosures the

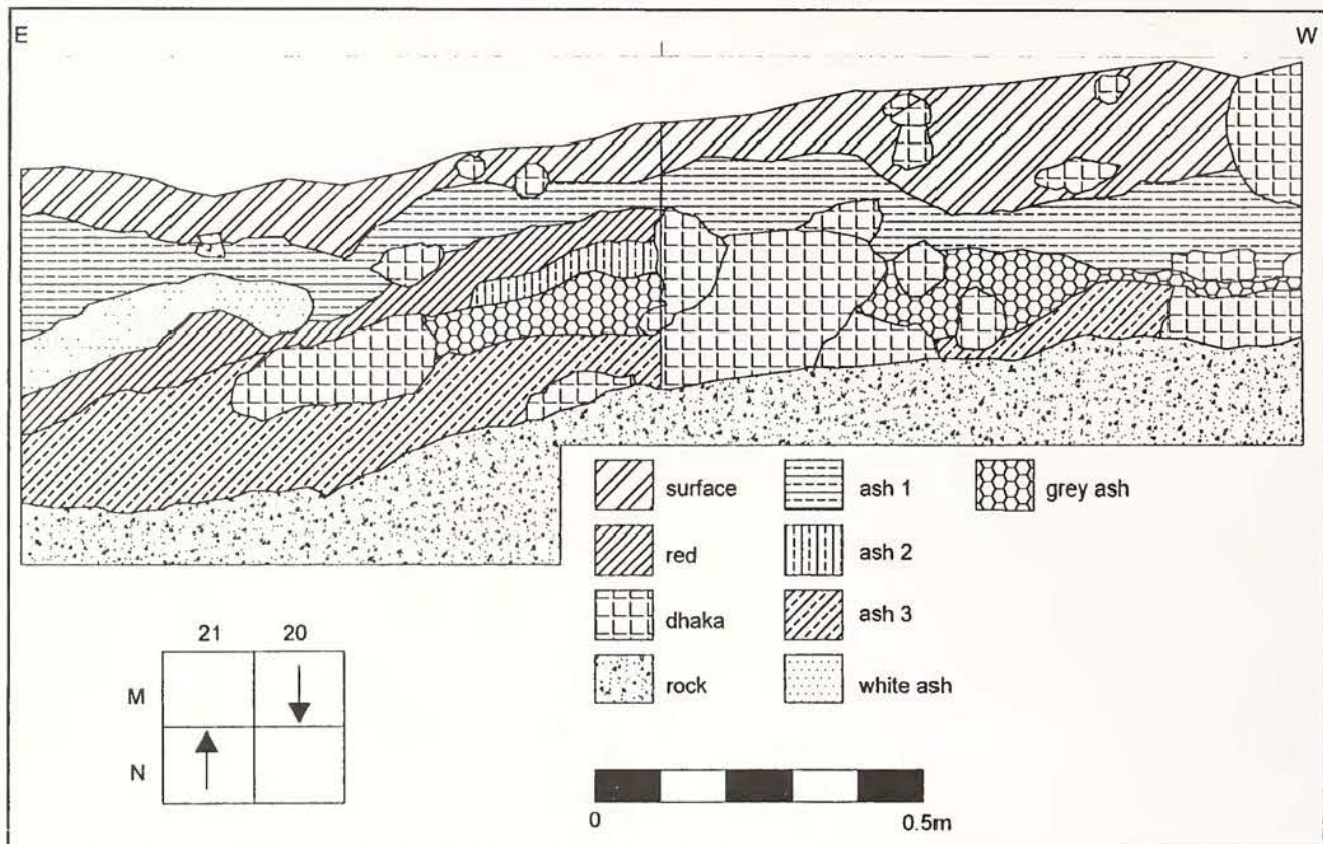


Fig. 6. Section drawing of the Esikhunjini Homestead 2 Midden 2 M20 square South and N21 square North profiles.

ibandla (court) and *isibaya* (kraal). The stone wall central enclosures are constructed in the same bi-lobial manner, with a large upper and smaller lower compartment. The enclosures face upslope, as do those at KwaMaza. Secondly, as with the use of stone at KwaMaza, the kraals and assembly areas are demarcated by stone walls, but not the peripheral domestic areas.

The Esikhunjini spatial layout discussed above suggests internal structuring principles that were still regionally distinct. There are no similarities to the Badfontein sites excavated by and Collett (1982) and the Lydenburg sites excavated by Evers (1975). In contrast, the settlements discussed by Evers and Collett consisted of circular stone walled central enclosures with a number of semi-circular stone walled enclosures attached to the outer side. Domestic areas are located in a circle or arch around the central enclosure, and were separated by a wall from the veld beyond.

Only one preserved house floor was found in the domestic areas, and this is clearly not a representative sample. The excavation of this floor does, however, provide a number of clues as to house structure. First, well preserved *dhaka* found on the floor was plastered on one side, pole impressed in the middle, and grass impressed on the other side. These impressions would suggest that the structure consisted of a pole framework that was thatched and plastered. Secondly, the house burnt down, as can be seen from the well baked floor and baked wall *dhaka*. However, only a small amount of

wall *dhaka* was found on the floor in the Homestead 3 Courtyard 4 area, which indicates that the wall was not high. In present day Swaziland and KwaZulu-Natal, there are numerous examples of semi-plastered beehive houses. These structures have low walls (0,50 m to 1,0 m) that are no higher than waist level at the base, with a thatched beehive above (Friede & Steele 1980:175). The combination of thatching and plastering the framework at the base, would produce the pattern of grass impressions on one side, pole impressions in the middle and smooth plaster on the other side evident in the Esikhunjini wall *dhaka*.

In light of this, I suggest that the Esikhunjini houses consisted of a thatched grass and *dhaka* beehive. This appears to be a modification of the thatch beehives at KwaMaza. In the historical context of the Esikhunjini occupation, the new house shape could have been a product of the *mfecane* disruption, as house form is shaped by identity, which in turn is a relational concept. It is important to note that Ndzundza identity, in this period, would have been defined partially in relation to the Pedi, as the *mfecane* resulted in a realignment of regional politics, with the Pedi playing an increasingly prominent role. Oral history also records that the ruling dynasty stayed with the Pedi, after the destruction of KwaMaza (Fourie 1921). In this context the change of house form may have been an attempt to signal more similarity with the Pedi and thus the corresponding shift away from traditional Ndebele house form.

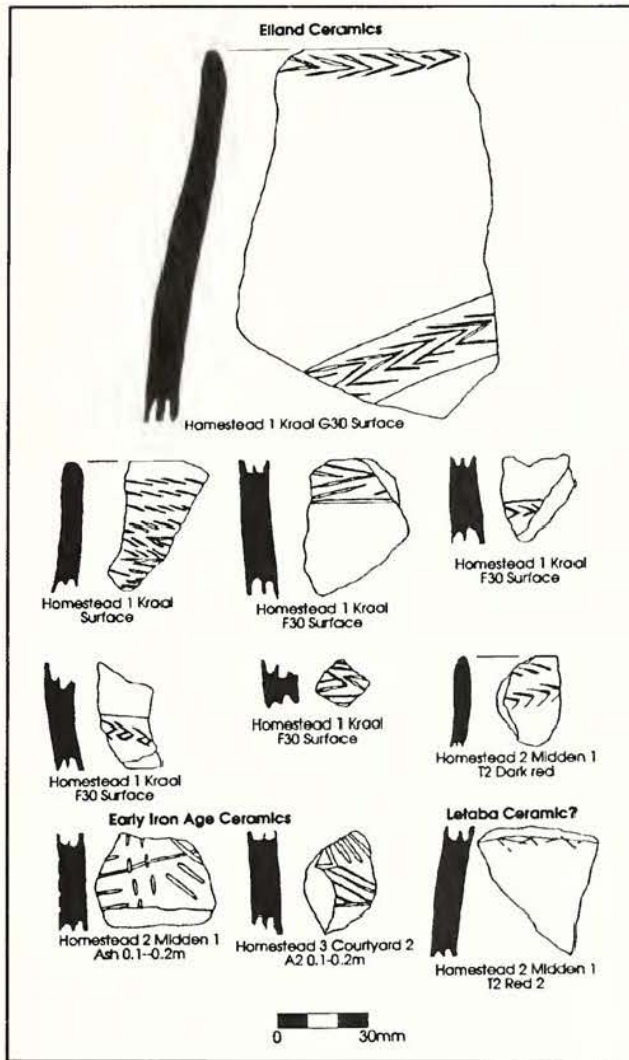


Fig. 7. Drawings of Eiland, Early Iron Age and Letaba? ceramic sherds from Esikhunjini.

Furthermore, this change created a material distance between the Ndzundza and the Nguni raiders. Other groups in the region, consequently, might have associated the Ndzundza less with the Nguni raiders. Whether the Nguni or Pedi elements of the house form should be seen as dominant would depend on the articulation of internal identities with regional relationships.

The next identity marker at Esikhunjini, the middens, are located in front of the homesteads over the perimeter walls and are capped at regular intervals with sterile red soil. In the Nguni world it is believed that the ash could be used in maleficent magic against the owner of a homestead. Ash heaps are, therefore, located in front of homesteads, so that they can be observed constantly (Raum 1973:145-146).

The Esikhunjini middens closely resemble the capped middens at KwaMaza (Schoeman 1998) and the 'Ndebele' middens of Loubser (1994) and Huffman and Steele (1996), both in their location and stratigraphy. The middens, however, appear to be capped more regularly and thoroughly than the KwaMaza middens. This would suggest not only continuity, but intensification of the

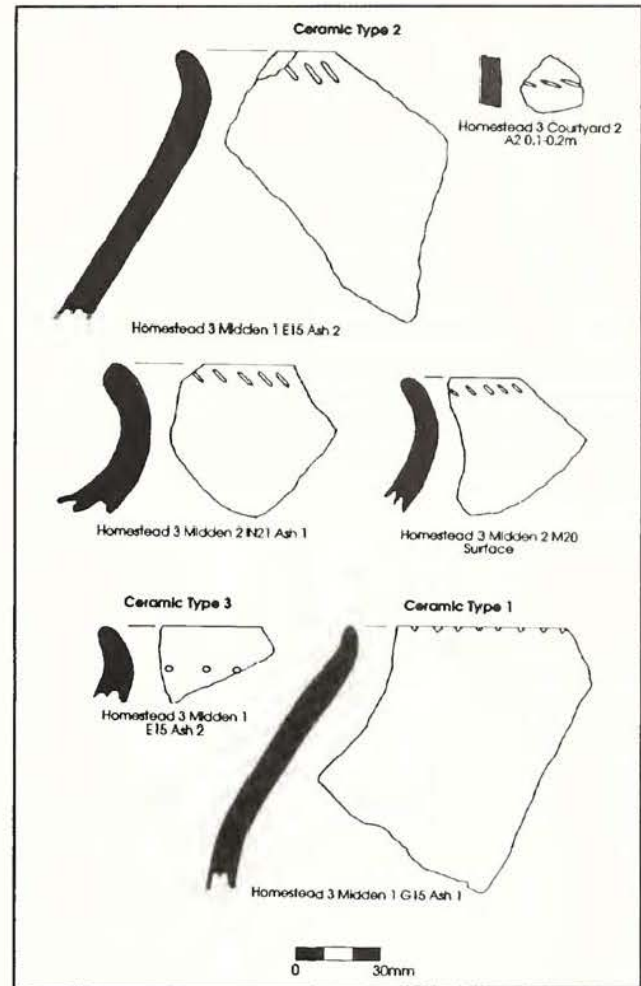


Fig. 8. Drawings of Ceramic Types 1, 2 and 3 sherds from Esikhunjini.

beliefs relating to the protection of ash against witchcraft, first apparent at KwaMaza. The intensification is not surprising, since Esikhunjini was occupied after the destruction of KwaMaza and occupation continued during a period of intense conflict.

On the other hand the pottery, though largely undecorated, has not changed and is similar to the ceramics found at KwaMaza (Schoeman 1998), and the Marateng ceramics found by Collett (1982). These are generally referred to as 'Pedi' ceramics (Laidler 1932; Lawton 1967; Evers 1989). During the occupation of Esikhunjini the initial signalling of regional inter-group alliance, would not only have continued, but could have intensified. A common style now would have further underlined a common alliance with the Pedi, the main Sotho group in the area, with whom they found shelter for a period during the *mfecane*. This interpretation is endorsed by the incorporation of new elements in the way women plastered the houses.

CONCLUSION

Excavations at Esikhunjini highlighted the disparate impact of the *mfecane* disruptions on the different types

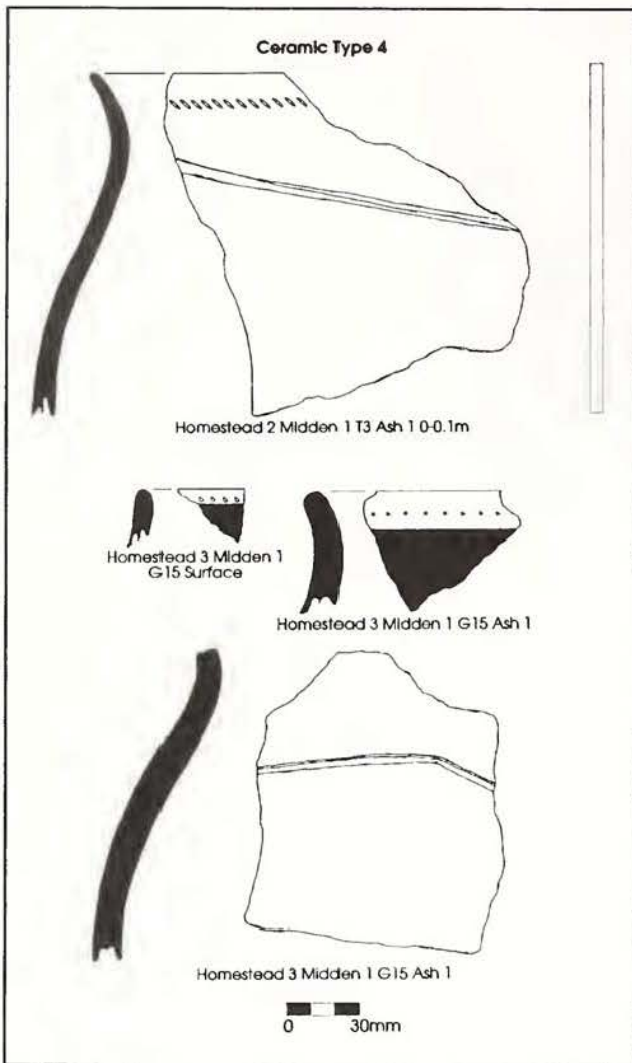


Fig. 9. Drawings of Ceramic Type 4 sherds from Esikhunjini.

Ndzundza material culture. Settlement layout is similar to that of the previous site is the Ndzundza Steelpoort River sequence, KwaMaza and is regionally distinct. The houseform, on the other hand, now incorporates regional elements. The midden location is similar to that at KwaMaza, but the midden structure, which is particularly 'Ndebele' signals intensification of witchcraft beliefs. The continuity of 'Pedi' style ceramics persist to articulate a regional identity, possibly underlining the alliance with the Pedi.

ENDNOTE

1. Left or right refers to the direction when facing into the entrance of a structure. When discussing the site in general left or right refers to the direction when facing down slope.

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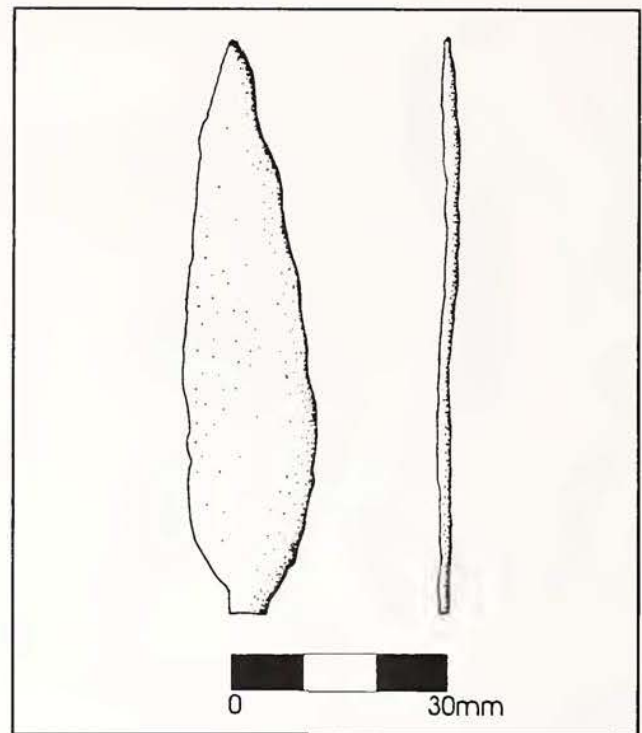


Fig. 10. Drawing of a metal spearhead from Esikhunjini.

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