

EXCAVATION OF A LATE IRON AGE SITE IN THE MAKGABENG, NORTHERN PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the excavation of a Late Iron Age settlement in the Makgabeng. The site is radiocarbon dated to the 16th and 17th centuries AD. The ceramics belong to the Moloko cluster found in Northern Province as well as in Botswana. Large amounts of iron slag and tuyère pieces indicate that iron-working took place on the site. A number of metal artifacts were retrieved as well as ostrich eggshell beads and glass beads. The faunal assemblage from this site shows marked differences from other Moloko sites in the area.

INTRODUCTION

The excavation and material discussed in this paper forms part of a much larger project, of which the main aim is to construct a sequence for the Iron Age around Blouberg and Makgabeng in Northern Province, and to compare the different units in this sequence to those from other areas.

The Makgabeng area is situated approximately 100 km northwest of Pietersburg (Fig. 1). This forms a 'highland' and is, geologically speaking, made up of the Makgabeng Formation, which is an uniform reddish to yellowish sandstone. This sandstone is in all probability aeolic in origin and was laid down from the northeast. In some places the Mogalakwena conglomerate is also found (Brandl 1986:24). The sandstone splits easily into slabs that can be broken down into pieces that can be used for building walls. Secondly, this geology is also conducive to the formation of small plateaus or 'shelves', some of which are big enough to support a homestead. Thirdly, the sandstone erodes easily, producing a large number of rock shelters that were occupied by Stone Age as well as Iron Age people.

The vegetation on the plain surrounding Makgabeng is dominated by Mixed Bushveld, while the vegetation in the Makgabeng itself is Sourish Mixed Bushveld (Acocks 1975). Large areas have been denuded of vegetation, giving rise to erosion and secondary growth, such as *sekelbos* (*Dichrostachys* sp.).

SITE DESCRIPTION

The site, coded as 2328BB5 (TM3), is located on a natural shelf below the perpendicular cliff forming the Makgabeng highland, on the farm Millbank 325LR in the Bochum district of Northern Province (Fig. 2).

As stone walls occur on the site, multiple occupation was suspected. In the area where the excavations took place, some very rudimentary walling exists. These primarily serve as terracing to produce small platforms,

possibly for occupational purposes, or to link some of the natural boulders together to form spatial divisions. It is possible that some walls have been robbed by builders of later walling located a short distance to the east.

This second category of walling is associated with Venda-speakers that settled at a later date in the area. These latter settlements occur over a large section of the adjoining farms of Millbank and Lomondside.

THE EXCAVATIONS

As there is little deposit on the site, only a few small trenches were excavated. The exception was TM3/1, a 3 x 3 m block dug into an ash heap down to a depth of 85 cm. It was specifically chosen as it was the largest midden on the site. The stratigraphy was simple and consisted of eight layers, arbitrarily excavated in 10 cm bits. Although a few smaller lens-like features were observed during the excavation, these were considered not to be of much significance.

Evidence of metal working, in the form of ore, slag and tuyère fragments, was found scattered throughout the site, but was concentrated mainly in three places. One of these, up the slope and to the south east of ash heap 1 (TM3/1) was excavated. This second excavation, TM3/2, was a 1 x 1 m block set out over a concentration of iron slag and pieces of tuyères. Although no sign of the furnace was found, pieces of clay encrusted with slag were found. The ore was small pieces of magnetite.

Two other smaller ash middens were also excavated: TM3/3 was a 2 x 1 m unit dug down to a depth of 20 cm; TM3/5 was a 1 x 1 m square dug to a depth of 10 cm. The last excavation, TM3/4, was a 1 x 1 m square to recover a large section of pot protruding from the ground.

THE FINDS

Pottery

The excavated pottery sample small. It was there-

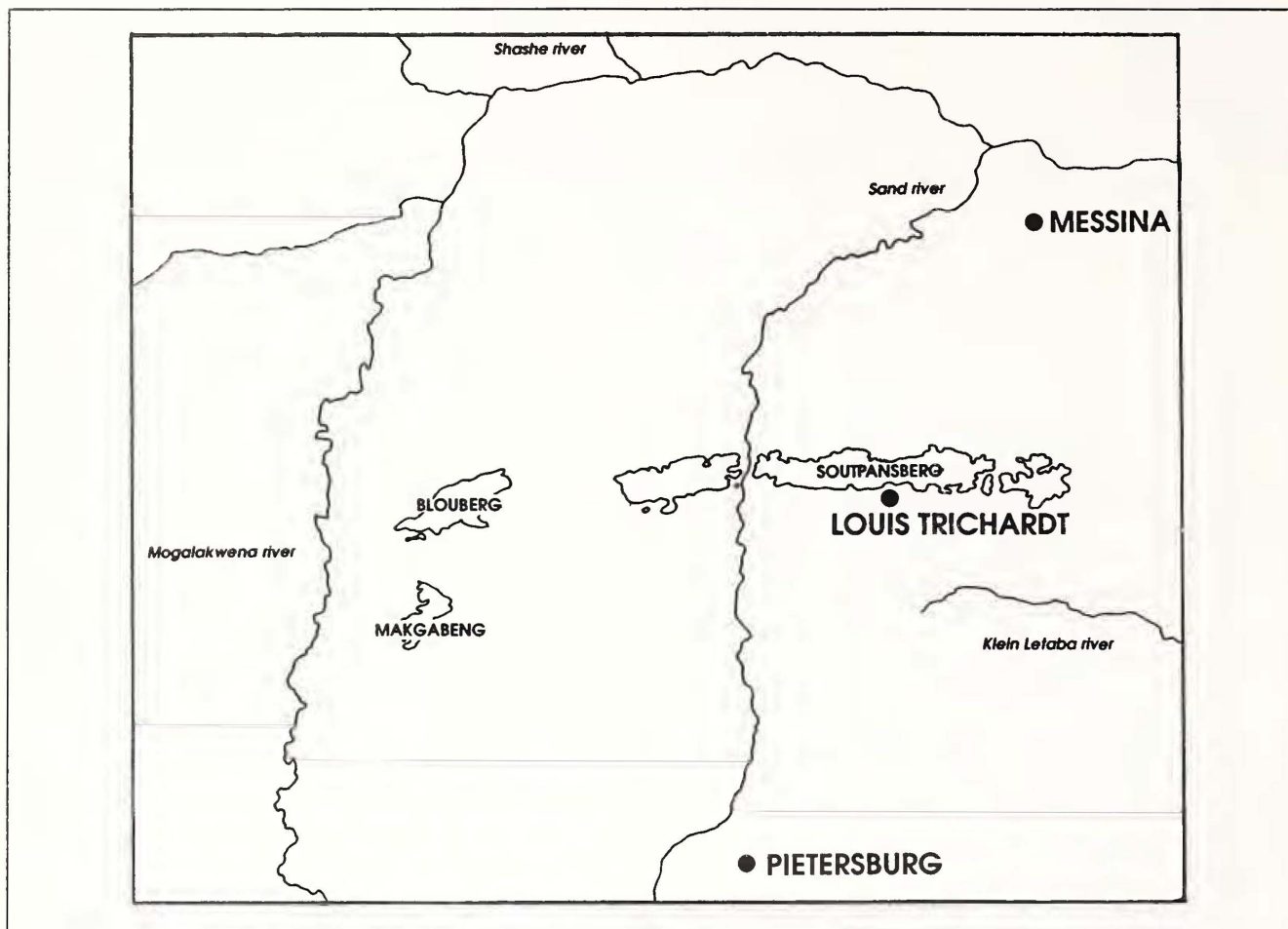


Fig. 1. Location of the Makgabeng area, Northern Province.

fore supplemented by an extensive surface collection in the areas surrounding the various excavations.

After reconstruction it was possible to identify 38 different vessels, 6 of which are plain. The pottery was analysed according to procedures proposed by Huffman (1980). In it, multidimensional types are formed by using three independent variables: vessel profile, decoration layout and decoration. Three profiles were identified:

1. necked pot with a slightly everted lip
2. pot with a poorly defined neck
3. bowls

A number of decorating techniques were employed, all of which seems to occur about equally: comb-stamping occurs on 9 of the vessels, incised decoration on 10 vessels, punctate on 7 vessels and rim nicking on 8 vessels. Some of these occur in different combinations. The decorations were grouped according to placement:

- Area 1: decoration found on the lip
 Area 2: decoration found on the rim of the lip and immediately below it
 Area 3: decoration on the neck and shoulder

By combining dimensions of shape, area of decoration and motive, there are 8 classes of pottery (Fig. 3 & 4):

- Class 1: Necked pot with a band of horizontal comb-stamping below the lip. On the shoulder comb-stamped chevrons occur, coloured alternatively with red ochre and graphite (3) (Fig. 3.1-2)
- Class 2: Pot with a poorly defined neck, with a single band of nicking on the rim of the pot (3) (Fig. 3.5)
- Class 3: Pot with a poorly defined neck, with a wide band of comb-stamped or incised decoration on the neck and shoulder (11) (Fig. 3.3)
- Class 4: Pot with a poorly defined neck, with a band of nicking on the rim, followed by a wide band of comb-stamped or incised decoration on the neck and shoulder of the pot, followed immediately with a band of chevrons below this (5) (Fig. 3.4)
- Class 5: Bowls with comb-stamping or incised decoration just below the rim (6) (Fig. 4.7-8, 4.10)
- Class 6: Bowls with rim nicking and a band of incised decoration below the rim. Graphite has been applied on the inside (2) (Fig. 4.6)
- Class 7: Bowl with rim nicking only (2) (Fig. 4.9)

Other ceramic objects are what seems to be a handle for a pot, showing bands of punctate decorations running lengthwise on the outside of the handle. A large spindle

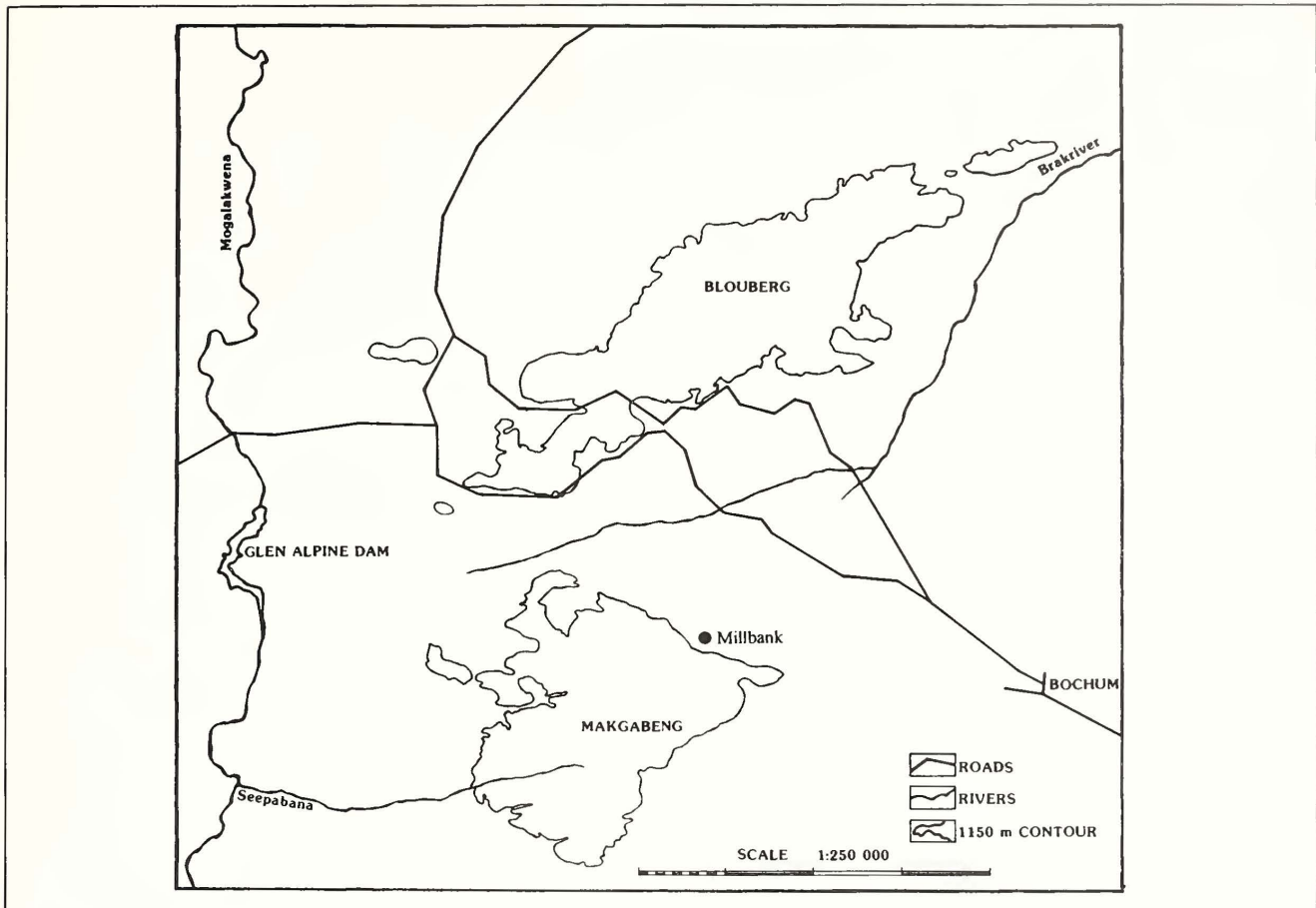


Fig. 2. Location of Millbank farm.

whorl, measuring 8 cm across, was found on the surface close to excavation 2.

Faunal remains

The identifiable faunal sample, though small, gives some interesting insight, especially if compared to other sites in the area. From the analysis, the inhabitants were mainly dependant on their domesticated animals (cattle, sheep and goats) for meat. According to the number of identifiable skeletal parts (NISP), adapted for skeletal complexity (QSP), *Bos taurus* occurs in greater numbers than *Ovis aries* and *Capra hircus* (Table 1).

Juvenile as well as mature animals were slaughtered (Table 2), with preference given to adults. The age distribution of *Ovis/Capra* indicated a majority of adults (Class V).

The relatively large numbers of cattle suggests that nagana (a parasite transferred by the tsetse fly and deadly for cattle) was absent at the time of occupation (Plug 1996).

Game species were also present: including *Alcelaphus buselaphus* (Red hartebeest), *Sylvicapra grimmia* (common duiker), *Aepyceros melampus* (impala), *Pelea capreolus* (grey rhebuck), *Hippotragus equinus* (roan antelope), *Oreotragus oreotragus* (klipspringer), *Damaliscus dorcas* (blesbuck), *Raphicerus campestris* (steenbuck) and *Redunca arundinum* (Reedbuck). These animals suggest the

occupants hunted for additional meat.

The presence of large animals and herd animals like rhinoceros, zebra (*Equus burchelli*), blue wildebeest (*Connochaetus taurinus*) and impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) indicate that men participated in community hunting. Small territorial buck, small carnivores, hares and birds were most probably caught with snares (Plug 1996).

Two pieces of bone that shows signs of having been worked, probably to be used as awls, were identified by the author and were not included in the faunal analysis.

Metal working and metal artefacts

A total of 26 pieces of metal was retrieved from the excavations, mostly from excavation 1. Most of these are, however, too fragmentary to determine use. Recognisable pieces include two spear blades, remains of two adzes, a piece of woven wire, probably used to cover the haft of a spear point as well as some sections of an arm band made by coiling a strip of metal around a core, probably of animal hair or other organic matter (Fig. 5).

Beads

Two glass cylinder type of beads were recovered from excavation 1: one small, yellow, 2,1 mm in diameter; other light blue, 5,0 mm in diameter. From excavation 5, came one cylinder bead, light yellow in colour, 7,0 mm in diameter and 9 mm in length, was recovered.

Table 1: Species present and basis of identification (D = deciduous; P = permanent; C = cranial; P-C = post cranial; SCF = shell, columella, fragment; O = other).

SPECIES					TEETH		SKELETAL PARTS			
	NISP	QSP	MCI	MASS	D	P	C	P-C	SCF	O
<i>Canis mesomelas</i>	1	1	1	9.9						
<i>Panthera pardus</i>	3	2	1	0.3		3				
<i>Felis lybica</i>	1	7	1	4.3			1			
Cf Rhinoceros	1	1	1	19.7			1			
<i>Equus burchelli</i>	1	1	1	45.9				1		
<i>Procavia capensis</i>	1		1	0.3				1		
<i>Orycteropus afer</i>	1		1	26.8				1		
<i>Bos taurus</i>	111	80	10	3128.6	8	25	19	59		
Cf <i>Bos taurus</i>	5	5		119.2		1		2		
<i>Ovis aries</i>	29	26	4	206.2		12		14		
Cf <i>Ovis aries</i>	1	1		8.7				1		
<i>Capra hircus</i>	35	28	2	257.1		20		6		
<i>Ovis Capra</i>	22	20	3	58.4	3	10		6		
BOV I	10	5		17.6				9		
BOV I non-domestic	3	1		8.01				2		
BOV II	9	4		44.61		1		8		
BOV II non-domestic	3	2		15.2				3		
BOV III definite	1	1		0.6				1		
BOV III	11	4		146				9		
BOV III non-domestic	3	3		77.1				3		
BOV I II	1			1				1		
BOV I/II non-domestic	1	1		0.1		1				
<i>Comochaetus taurinus</i>	1	1	1	10.6				1		
<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>	1	1	1	52.9				1		
<i>Damaliscus dorcas</i>	1	1	1	48.2				1		
<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>	3	3	1	7.7				2		
<i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>	2	2	1	4.7				2		
<i>Rhaphiceros campestris</i>	1	1	1	0.01				1		
<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	7	5	2	113.4				7		

Table 1. Continues.

<i>Pelea campreolus</i>	1	1	1	3.7				1		
<i>Hippotragus equinus</i>	1	1	1	101.6				1		
Cf <i>Hippotragus equinus</i>	1	1		35.7				1		
<i>Redunca arundinum</i>	1	1	1	4.2				1		
Small sized rodent	4	4	1	0.2		2	2			
Mouse sized rodents	18	15	1	1.67		3	1	14		
Rat sized rodents	30	21	1	1.25		3	1	7		
Mole sized rodents	1	1	1	0.3				1		
<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	1	1	1	1.6				1		
Lagamorph	1	1		0.1				1		
<i>Gallus domesticus</i>	1	1	1	0.1				1		
<i>Struthio camelus</i>	4			0.31						4
Very small bird	1		1	0.1				1		
Medium sized bird	3	2	1	0.31				3		
<i>Geochelene pardalis</i>	24	24	1	34.8					7	
Tortoise	4			1.6				3	1	
<i>Bufo rana</i>	1	4	1	0.1				1		
<i>Achatina zebra</i>	1	1	1	0.9					1	
<i>Achatina</i> sp.	10	34	1	38.8				8	1	1
<i>Aspatharia</i> sp.	1	1	1	4.5					1	
Unionidae	3	3	1	1					2	
TOTAL	376	325	50	4666	11	82	41	187	13	5

One string containing 37 (small: 3,0 mm; large: 5,0 mm; SSD: 0.3634 mm; AM: 4.08 mm) ostrich eggshell beads were found. Although these beads stuck together, no trace remained of the original material on which they were strung. Another 20 individual beads in the collection ranged in size from the smallest 3,0 mm to 10,0 mm for the largest (SSD: 2.7925 mm; AM: 7,115 mm).

Worked stone

One spatulate-shaped object, made from a slate like material, was found in excavation 1. It is 55 mm wide and 75 mm in length up to the point where it was broken off at the back. When complete, the object probably was triangular in shape, with the short side of the triangle somewhat rounded. Its function is difficult to determine as the rear section is missing, but it could have been used as some kind of spoon, or to smooth pots with.

DATING

The following dates were obtained.

TM3/1

Layer 2 (Pta-7471): 270 \pm 45 - 1649(1663)1675; 1772-1800 AD

Layer 5 (Pta-7473): 260 \pm 50 - 1651(1666)1680; 1775-1804 AD

Layer 7 (Pta-7465): 385 \pm 20 - 1503(1517)1528; 1554(1579)1601; 1614(1626)1633 AD

TM3/5

Layer 1 (Pta-7476): 180 \pm 45 - 1675(1689,1733)1772; 1800(1813)1886 AD.

Table 2: Age determination based on tooth wear

Bos taurus		Ovis/Capra	
Age class	NISP/MNI	Age class	NISP/MNI
I		I	
II	8/2	II	7/2
II/III	2/1	III	
III	1/1	IV	6/2
III/IV	2/1	V	28/2
IV	1/1	VI	3/2
V			
VI			
VII	1/1		
VII/VIII	1/1		
VIII	7/1		
IX	5/1		
Total	28/10	Total	44/8

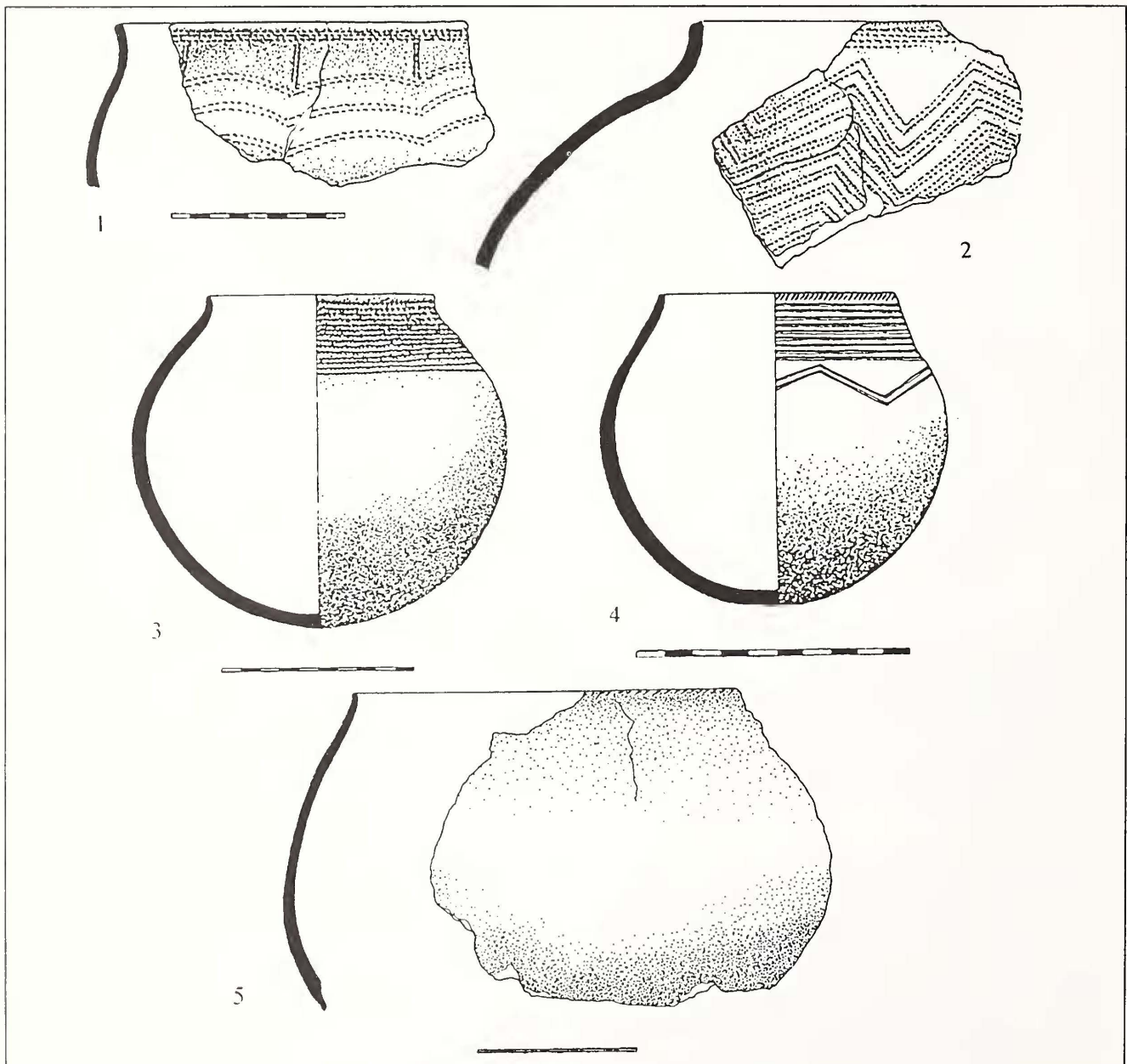


Fig. 3: Ceramic classes from Milbank: class 1: 1 & 2; class 2: 5; class 3: 3; class 4: 4.

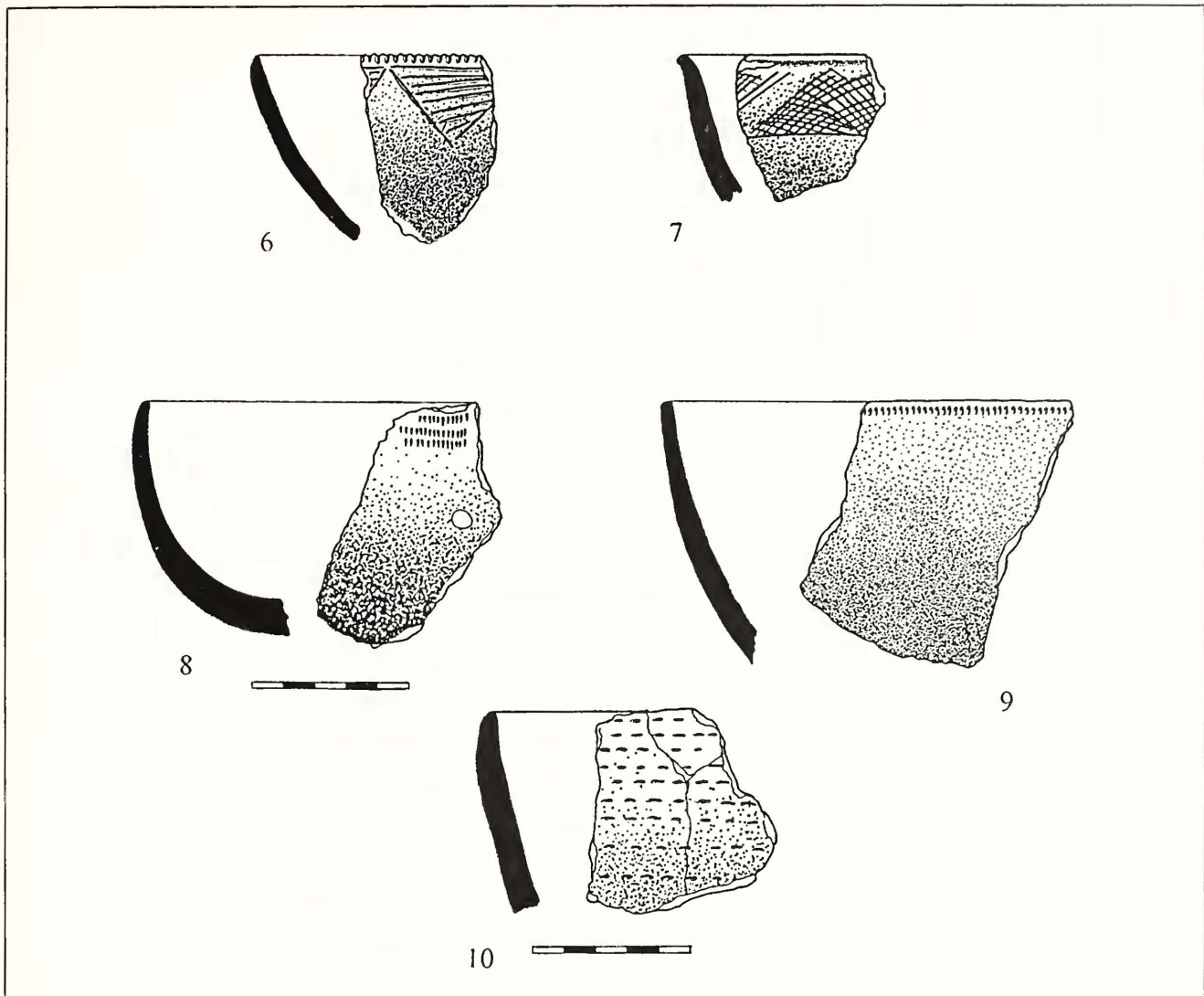


Fig. 4.: Ceramic classes from Millbank: Class 5: 7, 8 & 10; class 6: 6; class 7: 9.

DISCUSSION

The pottery recovered at Millbank is distinctive enough to place it within the Moloko cluster, more specifically in the Letsibogo phase, first described in Botswana (Huffman pers. comm; Campbell, Kinahan & Van Waarden 1996). Unfortunately, not enough information has been published on the material recovered from the Letsibogo site to make further comparisons possible.

The material found at Millbank, *ie.* pottery and metal objects, show broad similarity to Hall's RU-4 material in the Rooiberg area to the south (Hall 1985). Although the pottery is similar, there are also variations. Chief amongst this is the absence of certain classes. Some of this can be ascribed to the smallness of the Millbank sample. However, rim nicking, described by Hall (1985:198) as an integral part of pottery decoration on the hill top mode sites, is well represented in the Millbank assemblage.

The dating of TM3 is also well within the range of Hall's date of AD 1670 for Rooikrans hill-top site 131/78 (Hall 1985:144) and AD 1640 for Renosterkloof valley

floor site 101/78 (Hall 1985:179). This correspondence in dating is also noticeable with the Letsibogo material (Campbell, Kinahan & Van Waarden 1996).

However, in contrast to the sites in the Waterberg, only a small amount of stone walling is found at Millbank and even less at a second, later site located 40 km to the north west at Randjies (Van Schalkwyk 1994). The more extensive walling at Millbank, it seems, can be related to Venda settlement in the area. Differentiating between the two sets was solved when walling associated with ash middens were found with pottery belonging to the Moloko cluster.

Furthermore, there is, similar to what Hall (1985) found, a marked absence of glass beads at Millbank, in contrast to Randjies where it was found in relative abundance.

The faunal assemblage indicates that more domestic animals featured in the diet of the people here than at Randjies. In the latter case, the opposite was found. At Randjies very little domestic animals were identified (Plug 1994). Two possible reasons exist. The latter site is closer



Fig. 5. Metal artifacts from Millbank.

to the river, with nagana a bigger option, making the keeping of cattle difficult. Secondly, cultural practices such as the *mafisa* practice, which prohibit people from slaughtering and eating cattle. Historical evidence (Van Warmelo 1953) and oral tradition indicates that this practice was applied quite extensively in the area of Randjies. According to this practice, people lacking their own cattle would look after those of other people in return for used of produces such as milk or a certain amount of the natural increase of the cattle.

Evers (1988:127) see a movement for Moloko from northeast (Transvaal), with a date of about 1300, to southwest (Transvaal) where the dates range from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. He sees sites in the north and west as not Moloko, as the styles in this area were derived from either Gokomere or the Kalundu tradition. However, Icon (Hanisch 1979), a Moloko site in the north, develops into Letsibogo (Huffman pers. com.), yet another Moloko site in the north. Sites such as Millbank therefore confirm the distribution of Moloko outside the area indicated by Evers.

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