

INTRODUCTION

From 26th June until the 25th July, 1978, I directed archaeological excavations at the site of Mgungundlovu, near Melmoth, Zululand. This settlement was the capital of Dingane, the Zulu King, and was occupied between about 1829 and 1838.

There were two principal reasons for working at Mgungundlovu. Firstly, although parts of the site had previously been excavated, notably by the Department of Archaeology of the University of Cape Town, the faunal samples available from midden deposits on the site were inadequate for statistical analysis and floral samples were non-existent. Furthermore, the exact location of the main entrance to the site, essential for reconstruction work, was not known.

Secondly, both the interest shown by members of the public in archaeology and the need of the archaeology department at the Natal Museum for experienced amateur assistance, suggested that it would be profitable to organise an archaeological fieldschool during which interested people could acquire a basic knowledge of archaeological theory and method. Mgungundlovu was an ideal location for this exercise, both because archaeological preservation was known to be good and because a site of this size presents a variety of problems for the archaeologist.

As the resources of the Natal Museum were inadequate for an educational exercise on this scale, the fieldschool was organised in conjunction with the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Natal. The course offered consisted of 5 evening lectures, held weekly both in Durban and in Pietermaritzburg, ten days instruction in the field, and follow-up sessions in Pietermaritzburg to allow the students to work on the material which they had excavated. The fee for the entire course was R50. Nineteen people enrolled for the complete course, and a further five attended for part of the fieldschool. In addition, a further 80 people, on average, attended the evening lectures, paying a fee of R1 per lecture. These fees provided the majority of the funding for the fieldwork. However, factors such as the number of available students, the time for which they could be expected to stay in the field and the time taken up by basic instruction made it unlikely that the scientific objectives of the excavations could be met by the fieldschool alone. Therefore funds made available by the Natal Museum were used to employ a Black labour force to ensure that the necessary research was completed.

THE EXCAVATIONS

At the lower end of the site, several trenches were opened, under the direction of Dr Oliver Davies, with the objective of locating the main entrance to the settlement. Clearance of the bush and grass cover revealed a shallow depression, some metres across, such as would result from local erosion following frequent use as a thoroughfare. Time did not permit the full investigation of this hypothesis and future excavation will be needed. However, our fieldwork still leaves this as the most likely location for the main gate.

In addition, one hut floor was excavated. Unlike many of the huts at

xh. Mgungundlovu, this one was not burnt when the site was abandoned and preservation was poor, probably as a result. Dr Davies was able to locate the hearth and the holes where the withies for the hut roof were planted. He was also able to find postholes around the periphery of the hutfloor, probably from posts used to support a small fence or windbreak around the entrance of the hut.

At the top of the site, above the area occupied by Dingage and his entourage, a part of the very extensive midden deposits was excavated. 41 contiguous metre square units of deposit were removed, varying in depth from about 50cm to over 1,5m. All this deposit was passed through sieve units to remove artefactual material. In order to both ensure a large sample and to recover the representative proportion of the smallest artefactual floral and faunal items, a 4 tier sampling procedure was employed. Approximately 40% of the deposit was passed through a fine sieve unit (mesh size 6,25mm²) from which almost all classes of archaeological material were recovered. Furthermore, about one fifth of this sieved deposit was collected beneath the unit and passed through our water flotation unit, which enabled recovery of those smaller carbonised seeds which had escaped the sieve. Clearly, however, processing the deposit in this way was time consuming, and therefore mitigated against the recovery of an adequate faunal sample. Therefore the remaining 60% of the deposit was passed through a coarse sieve unit (mesh size 25mm²). As an additional safeguard, about 2% of the deposit that passed through the coarse unit was collected beneath the sieve and sorted through a very fine mosquito mesh sieve. In total, about 67,5 tons of deposit (72m³) was excavated and processed in this manner.

Detailed analysis of the material recovered from the midden has yet to be undertaken, and will take several months to complete. There is, however, every indication that an adequate faunal sample was recovered. Preliminary identification of some of the material was carried out in the field and it may be mentioned that elongated thorassic vertebrae of cattle are among the bones in the sample, indicating the presence of humped animals - a rare find in the southern African Iron Age. Many thousands of carbonised seeds were recovered from the sieves and from the flotation unit. These are mostly from the domesticated cereals, sorghum and maize, and are sufficient in quantity to allow a statistical analysis. Large quantities of fragmented pottery were removed from the midden as well as a number of iron objects. Exotic items, presumably brought to the King by White visitors, were also found. These include fragments of porcelain, glass, and brass buttons, as well as large quantities of beads of all shapes and sizes. All this material, when analysed, should tell us much about domestic life in Dingane's Mgungundlovu.

THE FIELDSCHOOL

During the course of the fieldschool, participants were divided into small groups and learned and practised the different operations involved in an archaeological excavation of this nature. In the evenings, discussion sessions were held, during which each day's work was discussed and any outstanding problems were tackled. On this course, students participated in six basic tasks:

- a) midden excavation - removing sieving and sorting the deposit;
- b) the water flotation unit - learning to operate a water flotation unit and sorting the material recovered.
- c) Faunal identification - sorting and identifying faunal material, using a comparative collection.
- d) Feature excavation - learning how to excavate a feature on an

archaeological site - in this case a hut floor.

- e) Surveying - learning how to survey an archaeological site.
- f) Site recording - operating the site recording system employed by the Natal Museum as a record of archaeological data in the Province.

Evening lectures included a talk by Dr Davies on the problems involved in excavating hut-floors, two talks by Dr Maggs, one on section drawing and the second on the Iron Age in Natal, an account by Mr G. Chadwick, of the National Monuments Council, of the history of the conservation of Mgungundlovu, a discussion of the methods employed in faunal analysis, led by Mrs I. Plug of the Transvaal Museum and a description of different kinds of maps and map-making by Mr van Gysen, who is from the University of Natal, Durban.

It is difficult to assess the success of a course such as this until some time after it has been concluded, since a basic test must be the time over which participation in archaeology by those who took part persists. However, the general reaction among participants was favourable - all felt that the course had been worthwhile and that they had learnt a good deal. The majority expressed an interest in developing this knowledge further and in participating in future archaeological fieldwork. Therefore from the students' point of view, the fieldschool may be judged a success. This statement, however, must be qualified by some observations from the position of the professional archaeologist. The time needed to ensure full instruction results in a considerable reduction in productivity on the site - an important consideration of scientific goals are to be met within available time and resources. For example, the rate of excavation at the midden declined by an average of 30% over the first three days on which the fieldschool students worked there, even though the addition of these people to the Black labour team increased by half the number of people working on this operation. If, on these three days, productivity had been maintained at the previous level, a further 3m³ could have been removed from the midden as a whole, and the sizes of the archaeological samples increased by about 5%. These figures suggest that the intense work necessary in order to recover archaeological data within a tight budget and the educational requirements of students participating in this sort of expedition are incompatible goals, and in future any site chosen for such a fieldschool should not demand intense or complete excavation.

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