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Source: *Goodwin Series*, No. 3, *Iron Age Studies in Southern Africa* (1979), pp. 133-148

Published by: [South African Archaeological Society](#)

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THE SIZE AND LAYOUT OF MGUNGUNDOLOVU 1829-1838

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Shaka, king of the Zulu nation, was killed in September 1828 in a small cattle enclosure not far from Dukuza, his own royal *umuzi* or homestead. Two of his half brothers, Dingane and Mhlangana, were participants in the plot, which was carried out while the army was campaigning against Soshangane. After some weeks of indecision Dingane had his chief rival for the succession, Mhlangana, killed and had consolidated his position by the time the Zulu army returned from its expedition. By mid-1829 Dingane had decided to build his capital near the Mkumbane stream in the Makosini valley, the area where Senzangakhona and his predecessors had sited their homesteads. The hill chosen was iSangoyane, situated in the confluence of the streams Mkumbane and Nzololo, tributaries of the White Umfolozi (28° 26' S; 31° 17' E). One of Dingane's ancestors, referred to as Nkosinkulu in later traditions, had been buried on this hill and may even have established a homestead there in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. By the end of the year building was almost complete and Dingane moved in with large numbers of women and warriors. He was rather more sedentary than Shaka and apart from short stays at nearby

barrack towns or *amaKhanda*, such as Kangela, he spent most of the next nine years in his capital Mgungundlovu.

Piet Retief, the trekker leader, was killed at Mgungundlovu in February 1838. After some months of tension the Zulu army was defeated by the Trekkers in the battle of Blood River on December 16th of the same year. Following the battle, Dingane burned at least part of his capital and abandoned it. Very soon afterwards, the Boer commando reached the site and burned whatever was left standing. Dingane had meanwhile moved north of the Umfolozi, where he built a new capital, also called Mgungundlovu. Not long afterwards, probably in 1840, Dingane was killed in rather obscure circumstances near the present Swazi border. The first Mgungundlovu was thus occupied by Dingane from about December 1829 to December 1838. It is clearly an important site in the history of southern Africa, and it belongs to a class of sites unique to the 19th century *mfecane*.

Part of Mgungundlovu was excavated in 1974 and 1975. The aim of this report is to correlate the excavation results with previous information about the capital's size and layout.

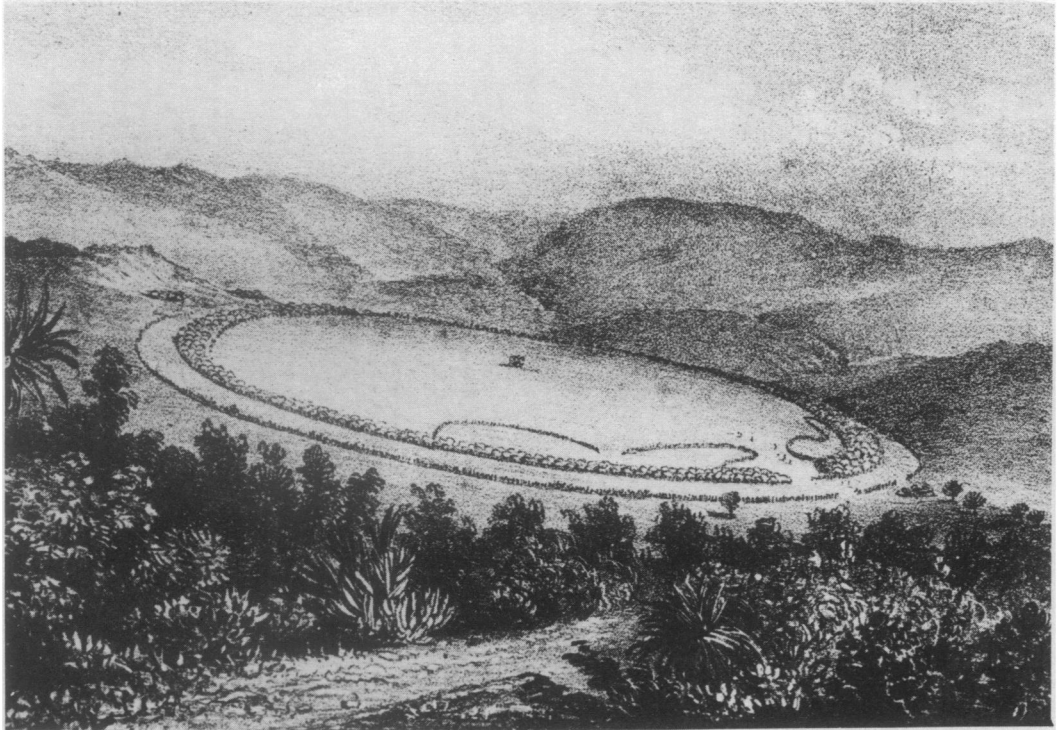


Fig. 1. Gardiner's sketch of Mgungundlovu.

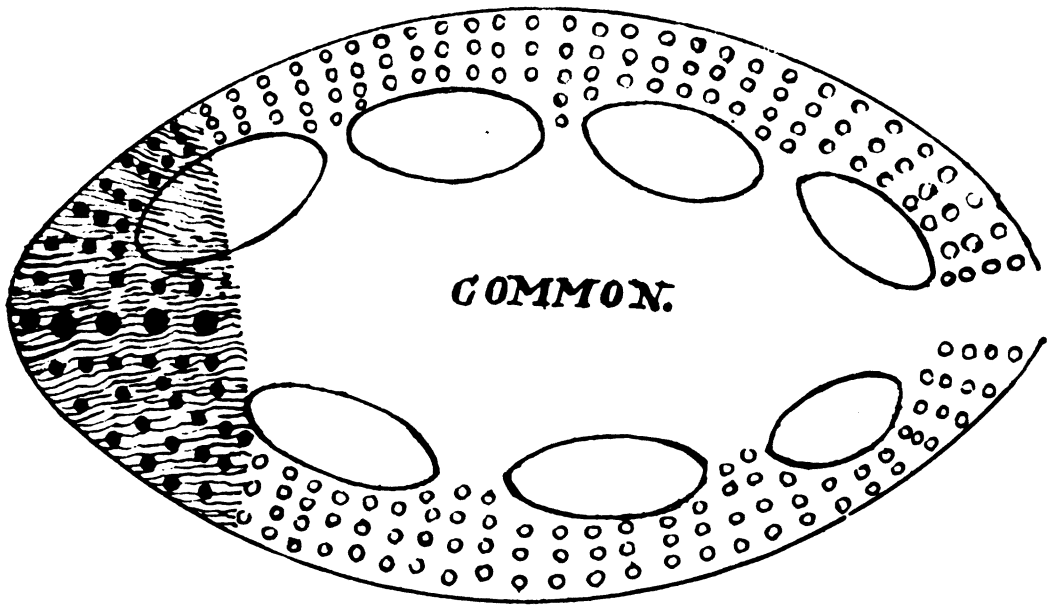


Fig. 2. Champion's plan of Mgungundlovu.

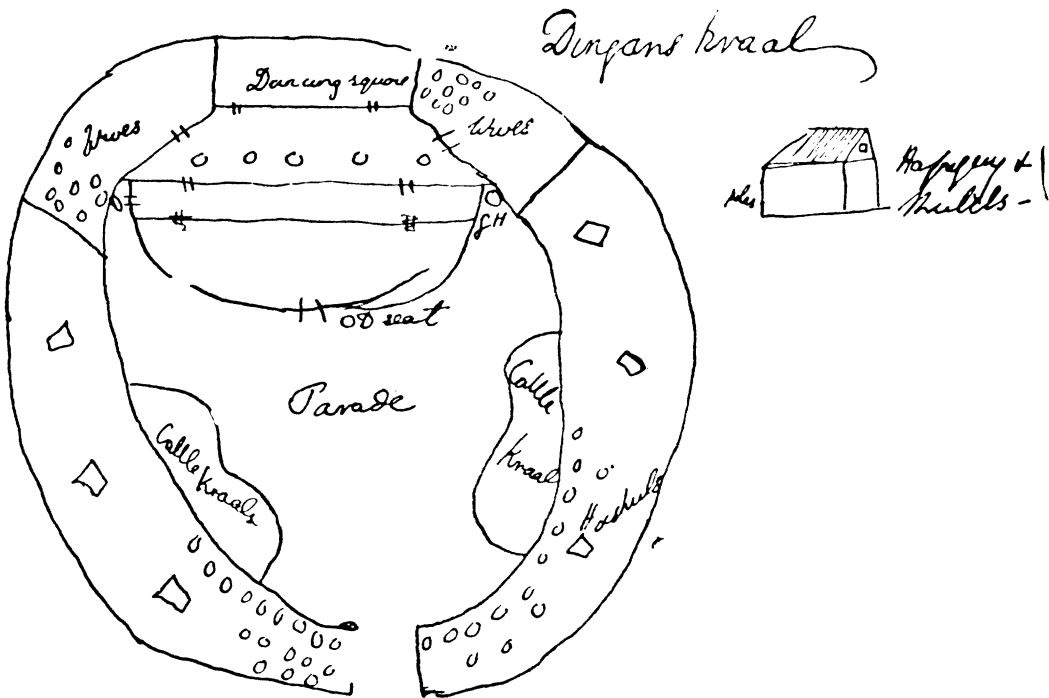


Fig 3. Smith's plan of Mgungundlovu.

CONTEMPORARY DESCRIPTIONS

During the first few years of occupation Dingane was visited by the traders Fynn (Stuart & McMalcolm 1969) and Isaacs (1970); both of them have left descriptions of their visits, though not including plans or drawings of the site. Dingane witnessed a build-up

of interest in his territory marked by the arrival at Mgungundlovu of missionaries from 1835 onwards, followed in 1837 by settlers interested in occupying part of his land. The missionaries Gardiner (1966), Champion (Booth 1967) and Owen (Cory 1926) left useful but fragmentary descriptions and drawings of

the site, while Retief (*in litt.* 1837) described it briefly in a letter. Dr. Andrew Smith visited Mgungundlovu in 1832 and made a sketch of the site on his return to Cape Town (Kirby 1955). These eyewitness accounts are the only contemporary description available (Figs. 1, 2 & 3). From 1889 onward James Stuart gathered valuable information on the site from men who had lived there as herdsmen, milkers and butchers over the previous fifty years. He also noted (Stuart n.d.) that “the circular earthen borders that enclosed the fire place and the kraal site of the old Mgungundlovu are still to be seen today”. In his book *Kulumetule* Stuart published a detailed plant of the site as described to him by his Zulu informants; other versions have recently been published in *The Stuart Archives I* (Webb and Wright 1977) (Fig. 4).

Gardiner’s descriptions of Mgungundlovu as looking “like a distant racecourse” (1966: 28) and “like an immense assemblage of haystacks” (1966: 199) convey much of the impact made by the array of thatched huts set on the sloping ridge of iSangoyane and surrounded by a high fence. By pacing out the diameter of the interior and half of the circumference Gardiner calculated the number of huts as 1 100 and, using a figure of five people per hut, a total population of 5 500. Champion accepted this estimate and added that “the place in shape is an oval”, with an outer and inner fence either side of the huts; the latter were “large, regular and admirably constructed, in some places six to eight deep” (Booth 1967: 31). He also walked around the perimeter and estimated that it would “occupy a half hour’s constant walking” (Booth 1967: 36). Retief’s estimate of 1 700 huts each “capable of accommodating twenty warriors” seems rather high by comparison.

Stuart’s map (Webb and Wright 1977: 309, 340) is perhaps the most detailed and informative of all. It shows three small “satellite” enclosures upslope of the main site which he referred to as “royal kraals”. He noted that the total number of huts was 1 500 and that these were arranged in four rows. Like Champion he pointed out that the main enclosure was elliptical rather than circular. Andrew Smith’s sketch of Mgungundlovu, the earliest illustration of the site, is similar to that of Stuart, but it illustrates a dancing area in the upper part of the site and six rectangular buildings, in which weapons were kept, in the warrior area. Gardiner’s drawing is more oblique but similar to the sketches of Stuart.

Most contemporary accounts thus agree on the overall layout. There were three upper enclosures which were known as the *Bheje* group. The main enclosure was oval and divided into an *isigodlo* at the top, where Dingane and his entourage were housed, and two horns in which the warriors were stationed, going downslope to the main entrance. Most plans show a dense group of huts in the warrior areas, and most place Dingane’s hut on the east side of the *isigodlo*.

The huts in the *isigodlo* are depicted as less densely packed, partitioned into small groups by high fences and well segregated from those of the warriors. It is generally agreed that there were two sections of the *isigodlo*: a white *isigodlo*, in which Dingane and his personal retinue lived, and a black *isigodlo*, in which

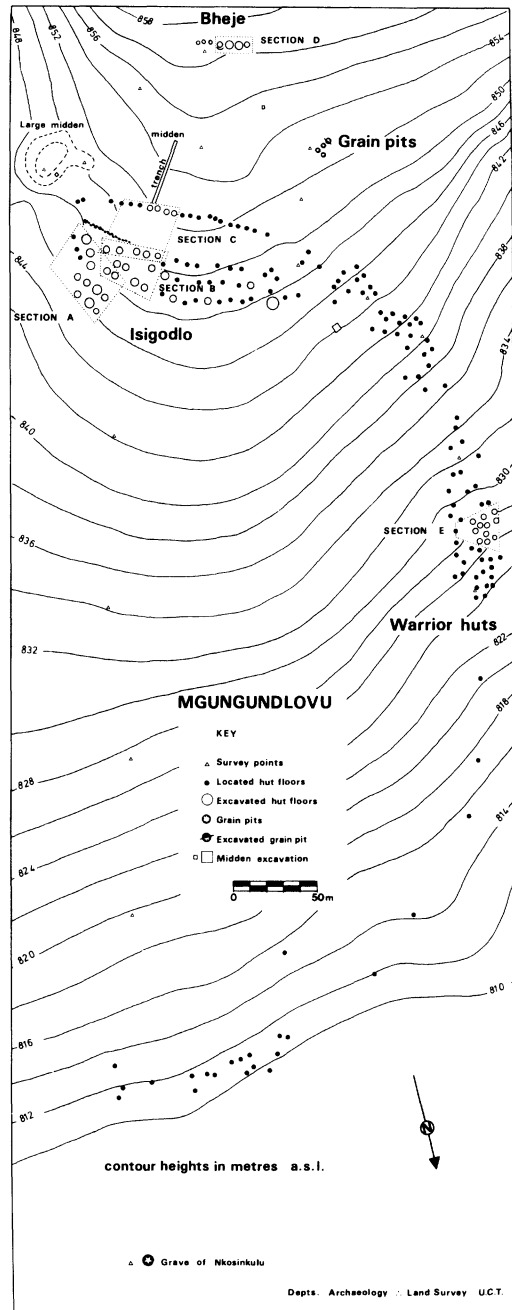


Fig. 5. Plan of excavated features at Mgungundlovu.

hundreds of *undlunkulu* or “royal girls” lived. Stuart made perhaps the most specific comment on the likely structural differences between huts in two sections when he noted that foodstuffs such as meat, beer and milk were kept in huts in the black *isigodlo*. There is less agreement as to where the two sections were located in relation to one another.

The barrack areas were not described in detail.

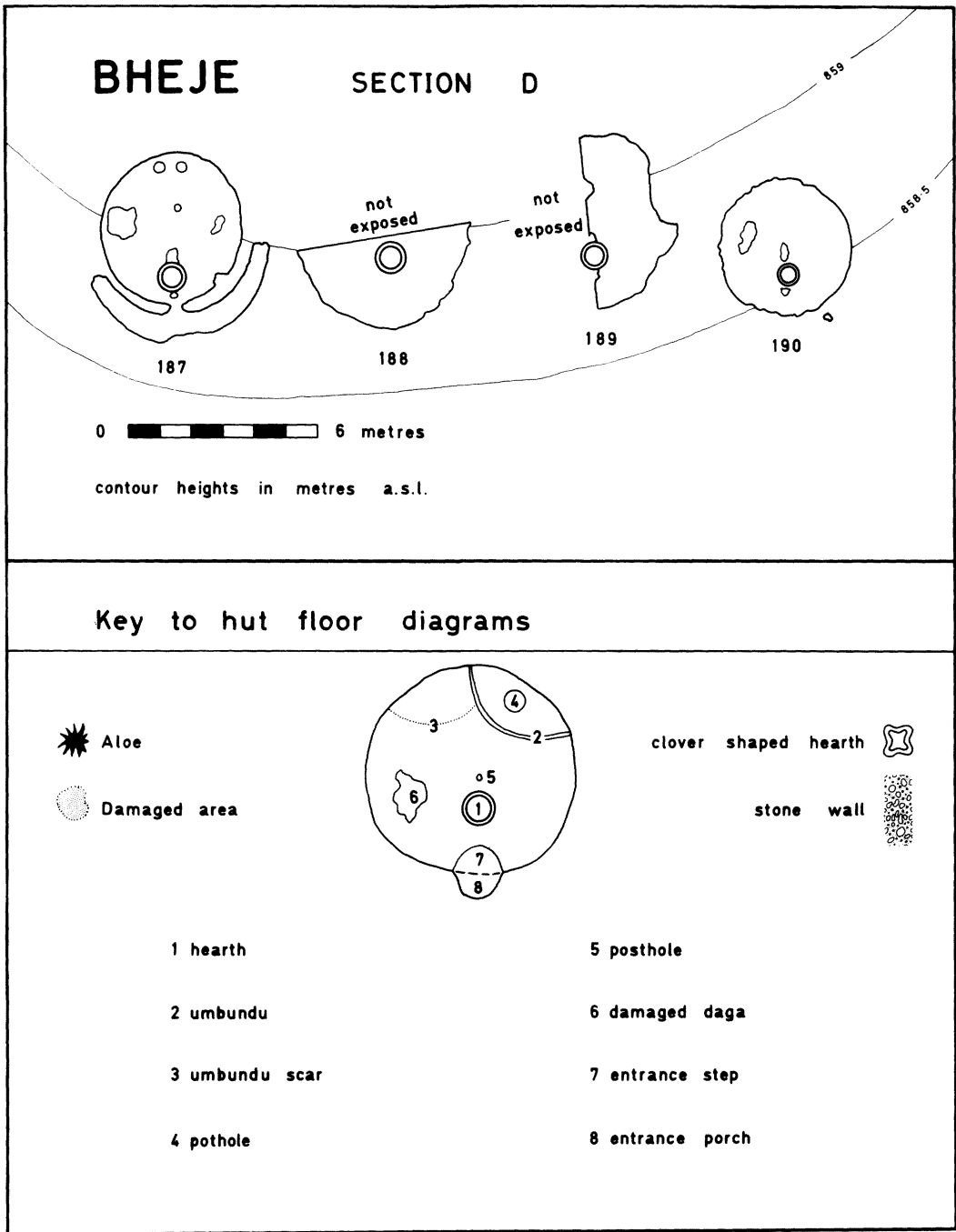


Fig. 6. Key to the hut floor diagrams which follow, with a plan of the Bheje section.

Some observers stated that the huts were in four rows, others five or six. The huts all looked alike except for the six rectangular buildings noted by Smith.

Only Stuart's informants offer tangible interpretations on the function of the *Bheje* enclosures; the central circle housed the royal family. Stuart shows

eight huts in a circle, while other plans agree that huts only bordered the upper part. The westernmost circle was a grain storage area, and it was usually illustrated with four huts. The eastern circle is said by some authors to have been an abattoir. No contemporary account mentions the existence of refuse middens.

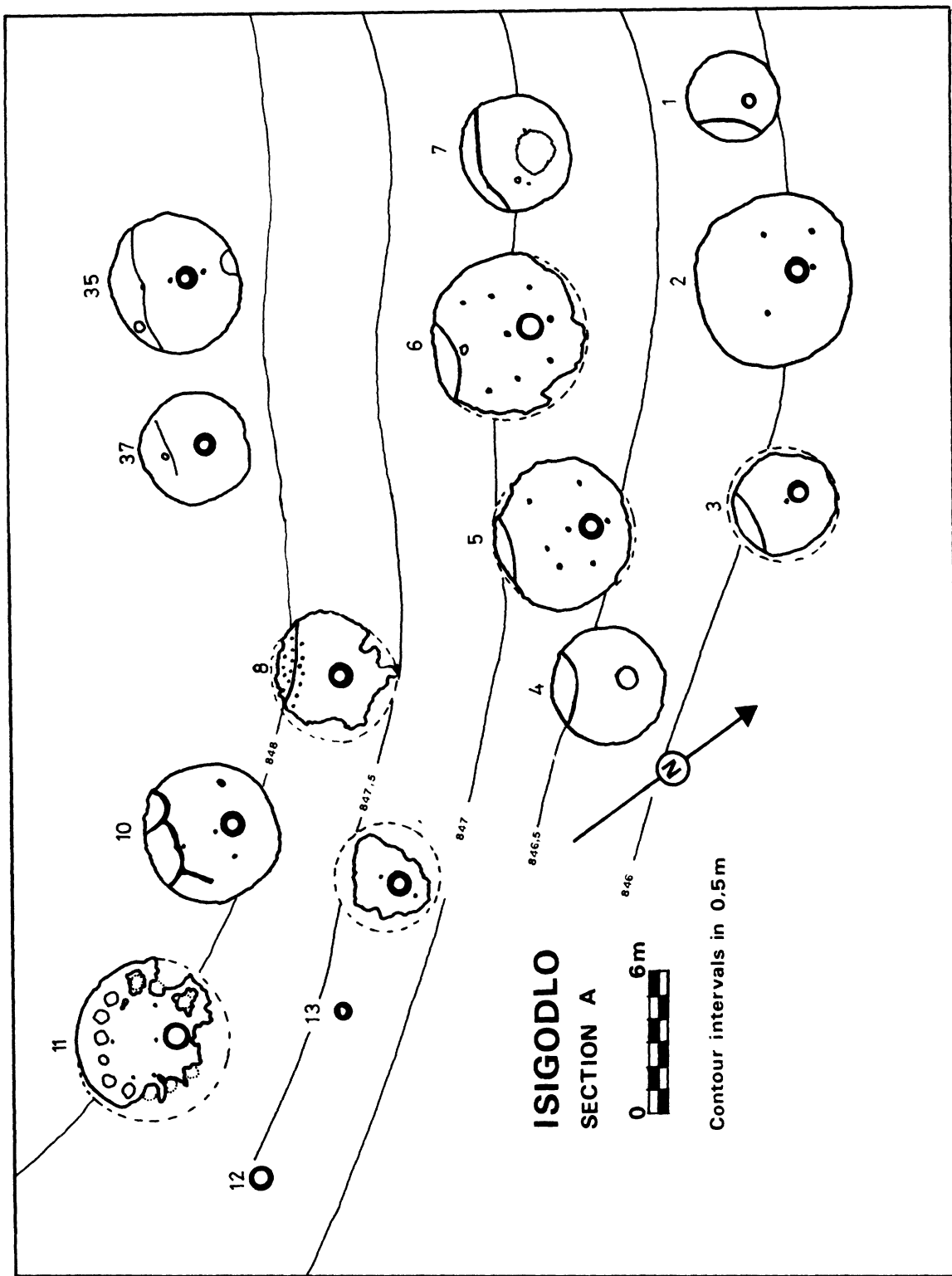


Fig. 7. Isigodlo area, section A.

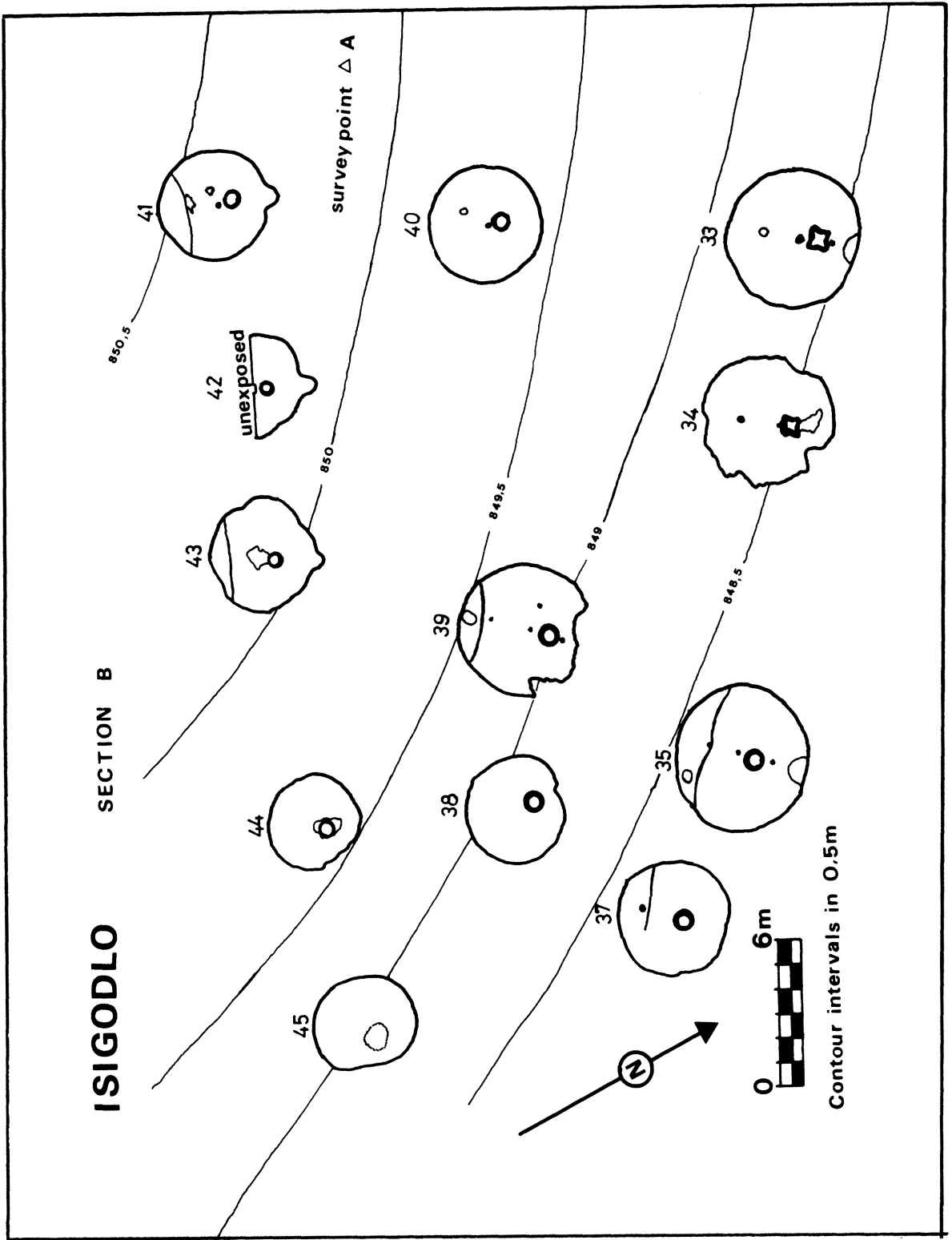


Fig. 8. Isigodlo area, section B.

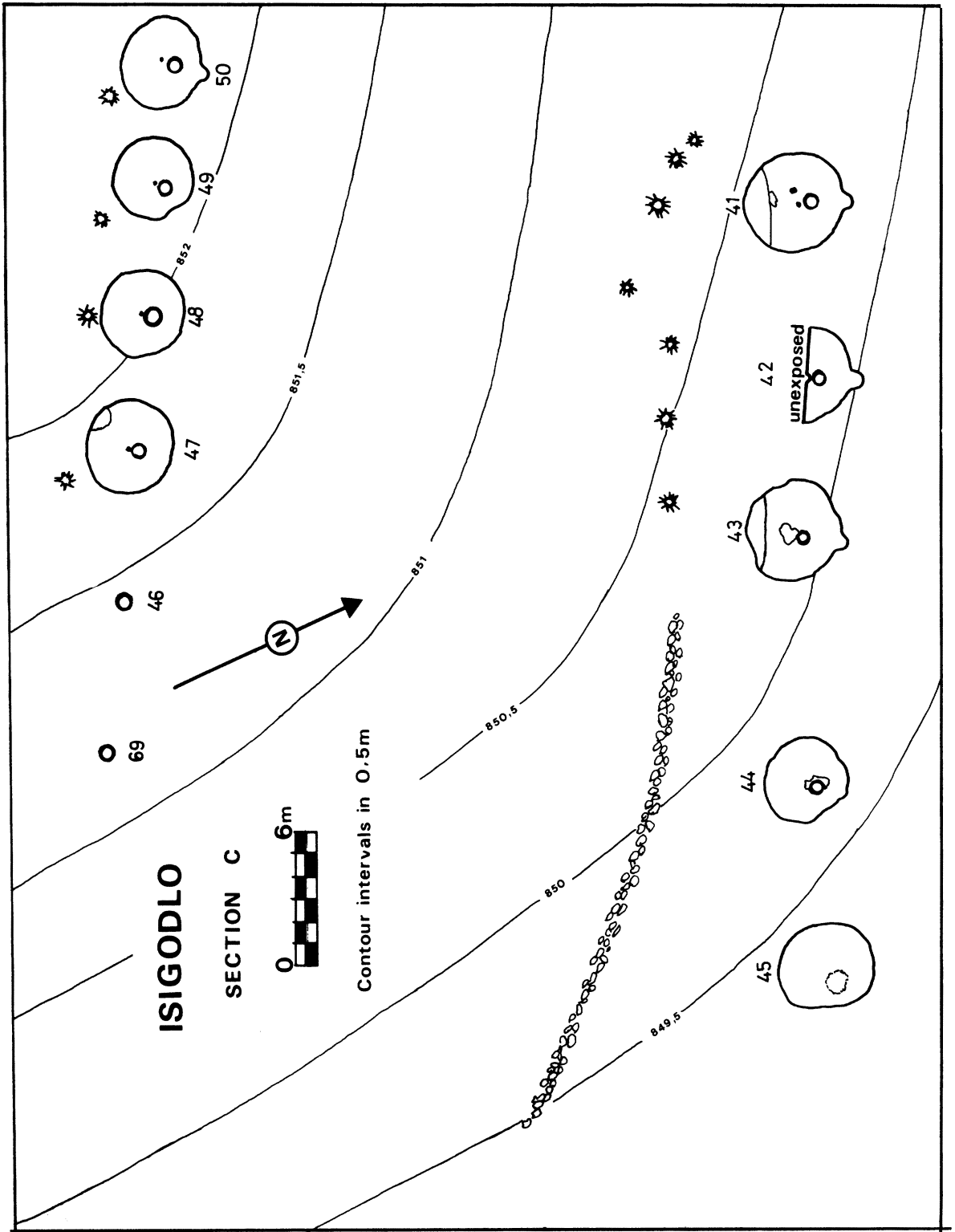


Fig. 9. Isigodlo area, section C.

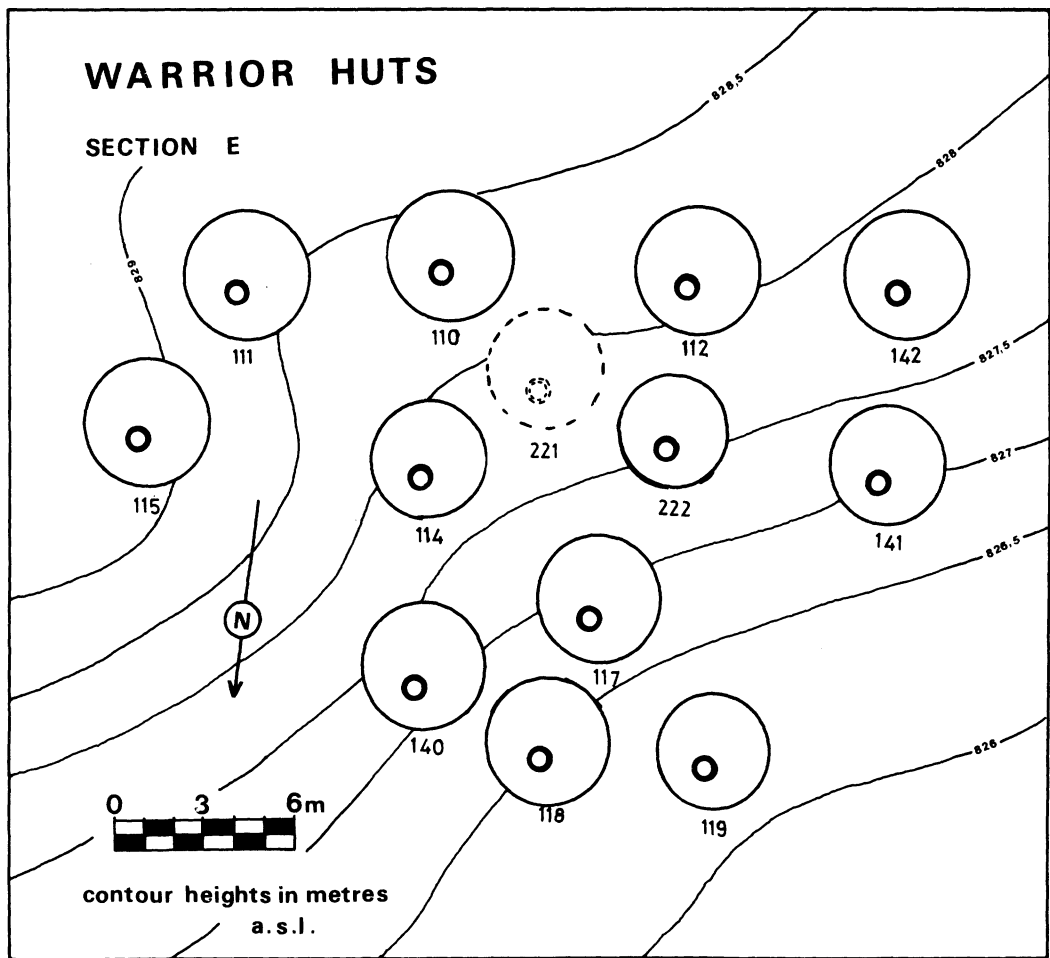


Fig. 10. Warrior area.

EXCAVATIONS

Method

In January 1974 and July 1975 members of the Archaeology Department of the University of Cape Town spent two months at the site. During these fieldwork periods permanent datum points were established over an area of the hillside that probably contained the whole site. Some 184 daga floors were plotted and recorded photogrammetrically, and 36 were excavated as individual units (Fig. 5). One half of a pit in the *Bheje* area was also excavated.

Isigodlo

Most of the *isigodlo* area was investigated, and 50 huts were located (Figs. 6, 7, 8 & 9). The huts were aligned in four rows with the back row separated from the other three by about 25 m of open space. Huts in the first three rows varied greatly in size (diameters average $5,10 \pm 1,04$ m) and distance from each other (mean of 8.12 m), and they appeared to have been individually designed. Common features in these huts

included low ridges which demarcated areas at the back and sides; large pot sockets behind the ridges; rows of small post holes for racks; and irregular sized hearths (diameters $0,62 \pm 0,14$ m), including some of clover leaf shape.

Huts of 5 to 6 m in diameter (e.g. Huts 14 & 39: Figs. 12 & 13) had three posts aligned with the hearth and entrance: one at the back, one in the middle behind the hearth, and one near the front. Huts over 6 m in diameter contained lateral rows of posts; two huts (Huts 11 & 23: Figs. 14 & 13) had nine posts arranged in three rows.

Two hut floors in the *isigodlo* area require some further explanation. Hut floor 11, though badly damaged by root action, must originally have had about 12 pot sockets and no ridge. Hut 23, at the extreme western edge of the *isigodlo*, was the largest discovered. It had at least three sets of small parallel post holes around the rear, which may have supported wooden racks.

The huts in the back row of the *isigodlo* were a standard size (diameter average 3,9 m) and closer together (average 6,07 m between hearths). They con-

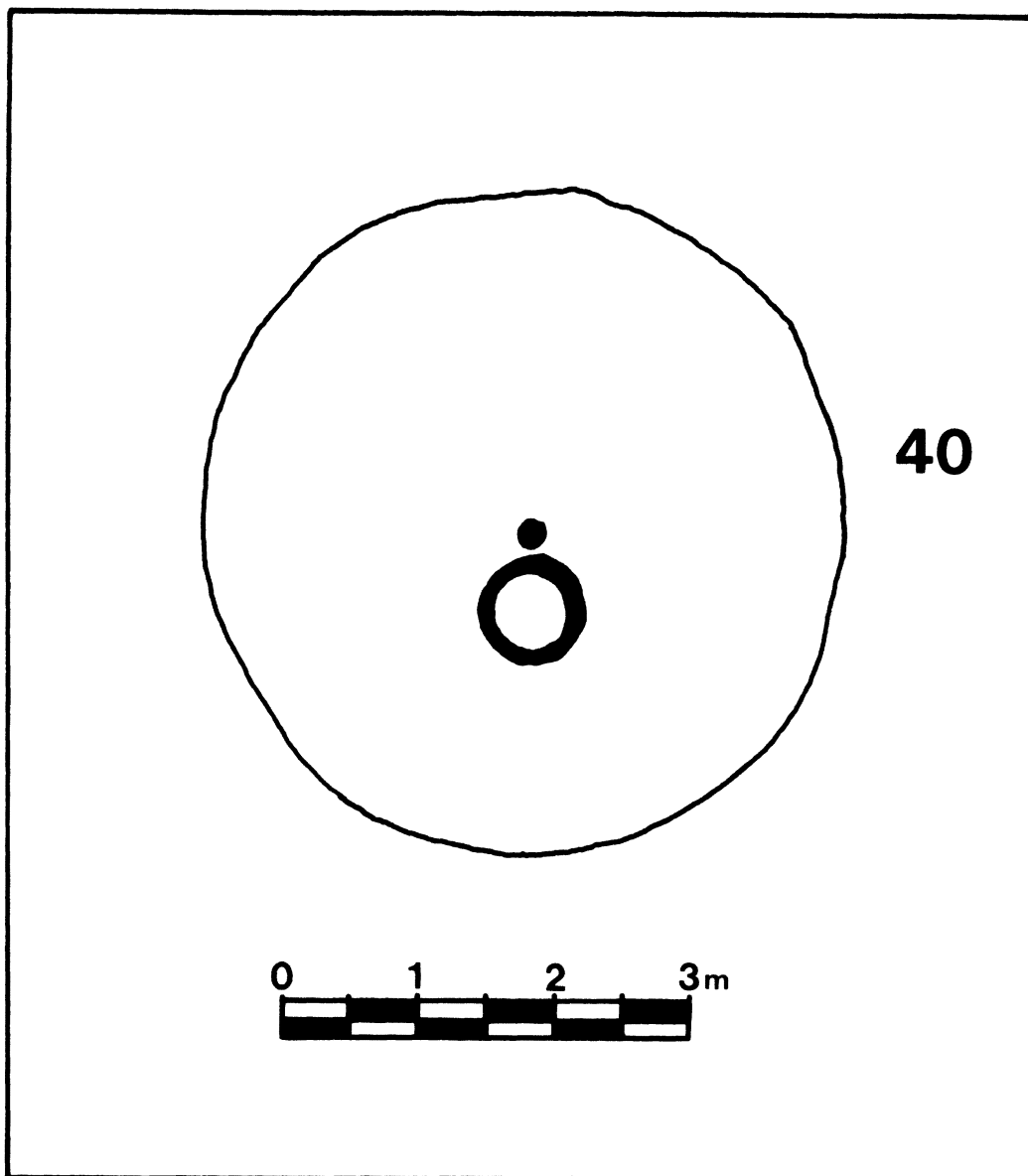


Fig. 11. Example of a single post hut.

tained only one post hole, a standard shaped hearth and normally nothing else. Hut 40 (Fig. 11), although not itself in the back row, is an illustration of this type.

Excavations behind the rear row and between huts in the *isigodlo* did not reveal any identifiable traces of stockades.

Barrack Areas

A small sector in the western barrack area was probed, and 33 huts were located (Fig. 10). These huts were evenly spaced (5,92 m between hearths) and not aligned. They had a uniform size ($3,68 \pm 0,16$ m diameter) and format – one central post hole and a sim-

ple circular hearth – and the hearths had similar diameters ($0,58 \pm 0,04$ m). The entrances were probably on the downslope side in a line with the hearth and post.

Bheje

The remains of seven hut floors were located about 110 m upslope from the back row of the *isigodlo*, and these mark the central *Bheje* enclosure (Fig. 6). They were arranged in a shallow arc around the upper perimeter. Some of these huts were unusual, in particular Hut 187 which had a polished clay patio in front. The adjacent hut floor (Hut 188) had a narrow trench

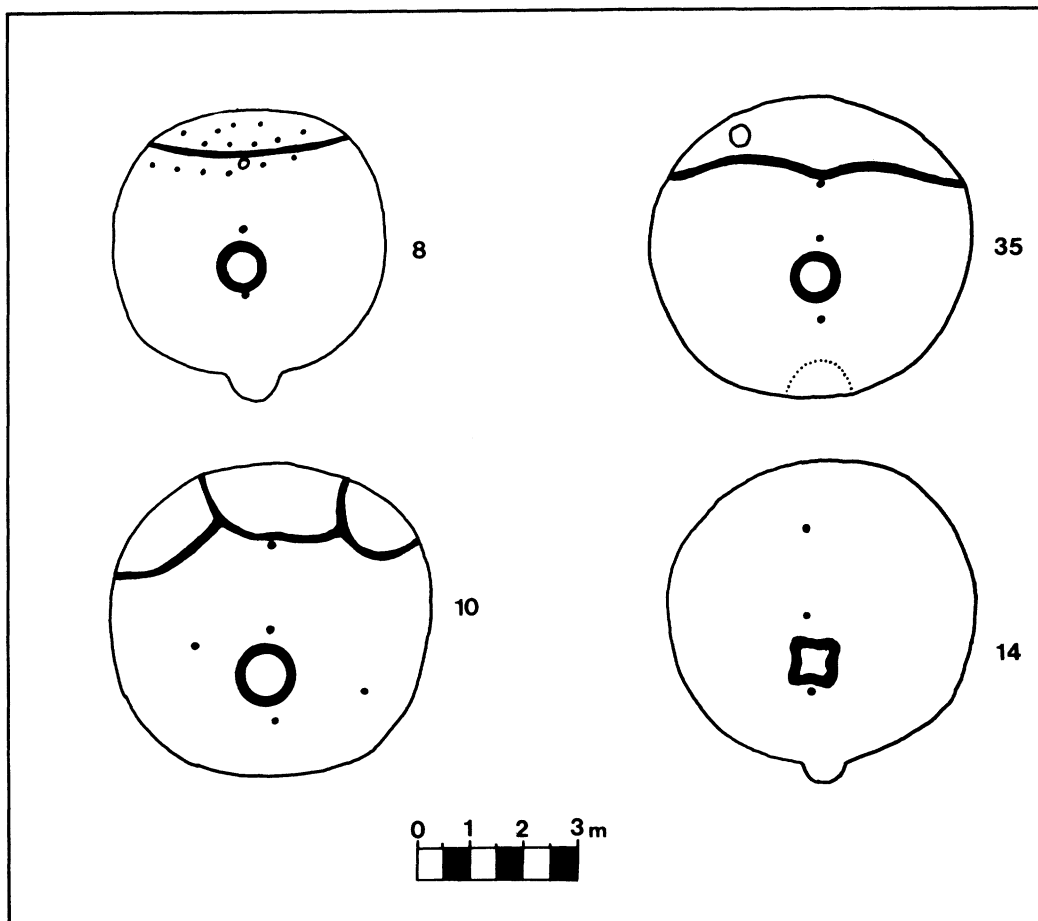


Fig. 12. Huts displaying a variety of internal features.

within the daga floor which may have been an interior feature.

Five brass bangles were found on the floor of Hut 190; Hut 189 yielded ochre-stained grindstones and lumps of ochre; both huts produced blue-spotted, white glass beads.

The westernmost circle in the *Bheje* area contained four shallow, grass-filled depressions of about 2 m diameter. Half of one was excavated; it was a bell-shaped pit (Fig. 15) with a volume of about 5,3 m³. The pit produced a broken schist mould, the upper surface of which contained 15 subcircular depressions in two lines about 30 mm apart (Fig. 16). A small piece of burnt stick was embedded in a tiny perforation in the base of each depression and the sides of the mould bore long grooves. Fragments of a crucible and droplets of brass were found between the pit area and the central *Bheje* enclosure.

General

So far, what appears to be only one half of the hut distribution has been located; much of the other half has been lost through ploughing. The arc of hut floors

from the grave of Nkosinkulu to the *isigodlo* (Fig. 5) probably gives a fair reflection of the size and shape of the original layout, however, since it represents one half of a symmetrical design. The main entrance must lie somewhere near the lowermost floors, as it is reported to have been close to the grave of Nkosinkulu. It appears, therefore, that the main enclosure at Mgungundlovu was egg-shaped with maximum and minimum diameters of about 570 m north-south and 500 m east-west, with an area of about 22,5 hectares. The circumference would have been about 1,7 km.

DISCUSSION

The excavations reported here have served to amplify some aspects of the occupation of Mgungundlovu, particularly those relating to the size and layout of the site.

The *isigodlo* contained larger huts than the barracks, and it was the most complex area in terms of hut features. The standardized huts in the rear row may have been the black *isigodlo*, residence of the royal girls. If so, then the other three rows comprised the white *isigodlo* where Dingane's personal retinue lived. Given

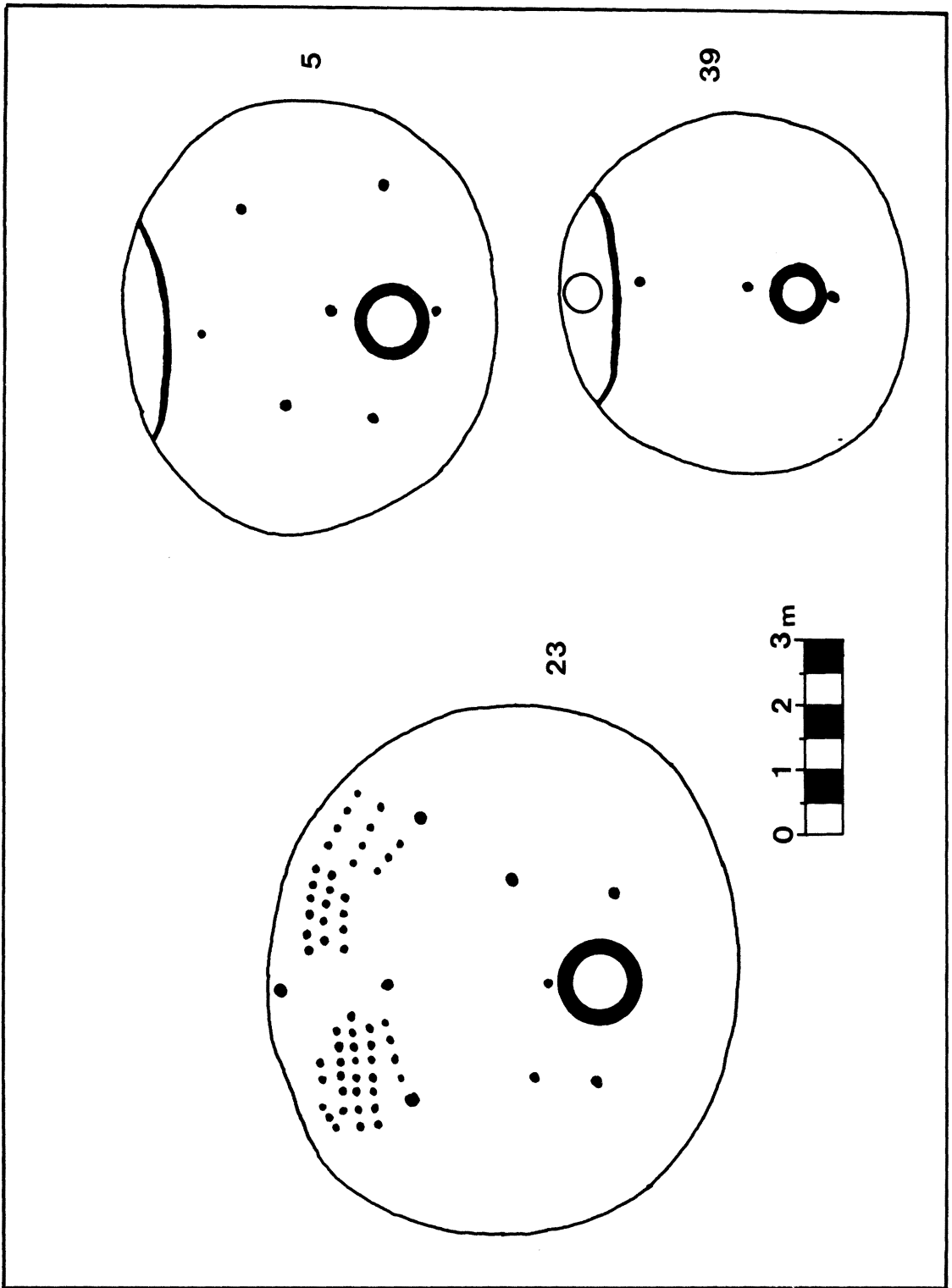


Fig. 13. Large huts, including Hut 23 which has sets of presumed racking post holes.

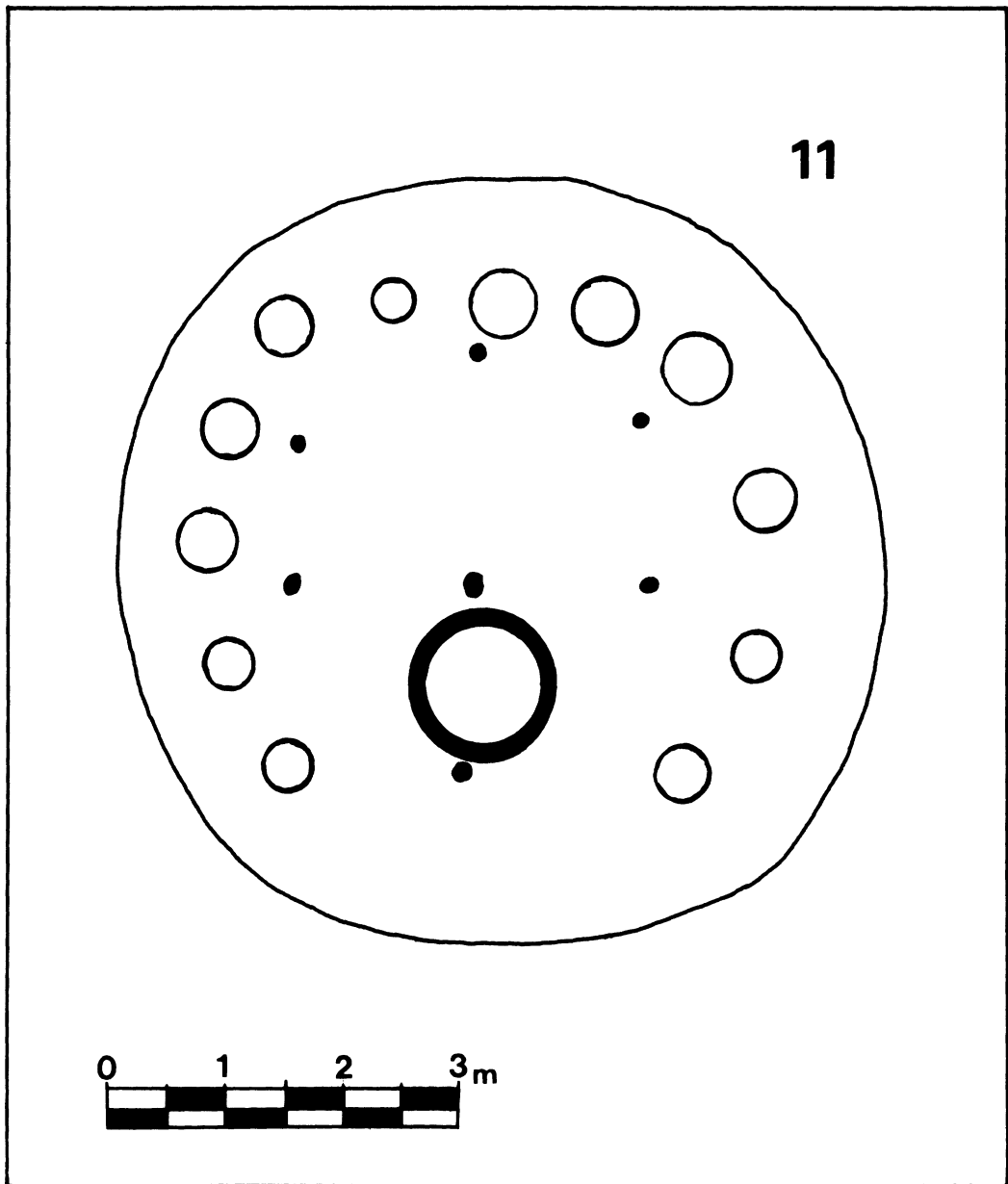


Fig. 14. Hut 12, presumed to be a beer storage hut.

the similarity between the huts in the rear row of the *isigodlo* and huts in the barrack area, it is also possible that the rear row was occupied by warriors as a defence measure, though this situation is never mentioned in contemporary accounts. If warriors occupied the back, then the distinction between black and white *isigodlo* sections must be found in the front three hut rows and has not yet been recognized.

Hut 23 may have been a weapon storage centre since it contained at least three sets of small post holes and was located at the extreme western end of the *isigodlo* close to the warrior huts (Fig. 13). It is

interesting in this connection that Dingane's chief *izinduna*, Ndlele and Nzobo, occupied huts on the extremities of the *isigodlo* – Nzobo on the western extremity. Krige (1936: 44) noted that "in the old days when the headman of each district had to store the weapons of the warriors in his area, there was in his kraal also a special hut for shields and assegais, which were neatly arranged on small wooden racks raised about six inches from the floor." Only one account mentions shield storage huts at Mgungundlovu, but it refers to "four huts erected on poles which contained the arms of his troops" (Wood 1840: 12). Such fea-

GRAINPIT SECTION

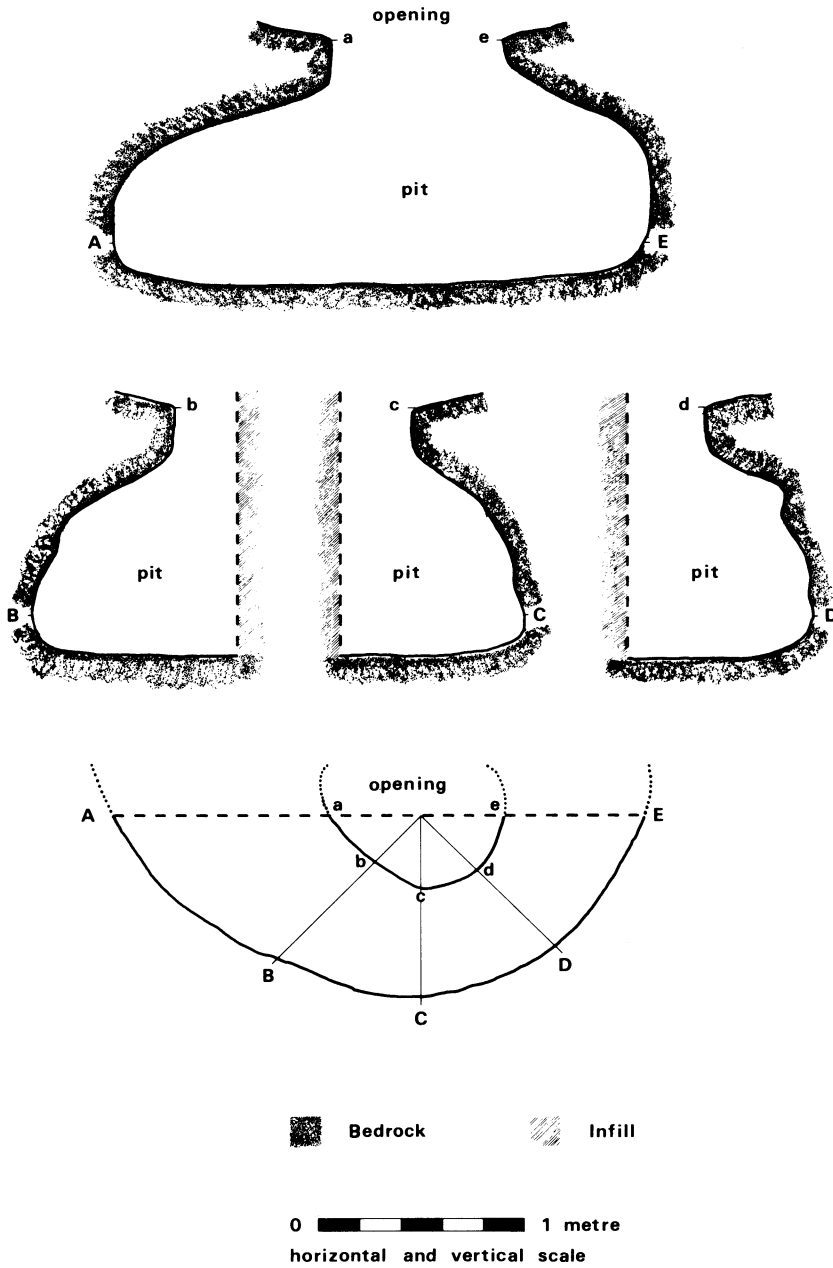


Fig. 15. Section through the excavated grain pit.

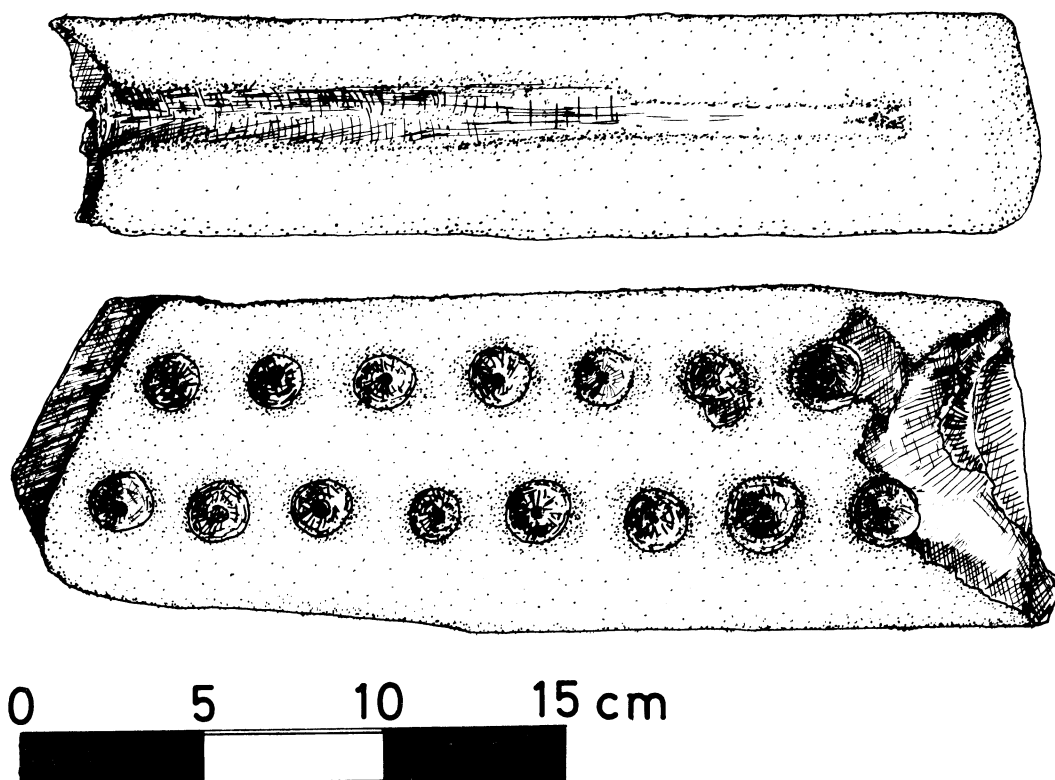


Fig. 16. Schist bead and bangle mold.

tures have not yet been located, but the similarity between Krige's comment and the features and location of Hut 23 suggest that some arms may have been housed in modified versions of ground-level huts. Nzobo's hut may be one of those very close to Hut 23.

The question of Dingane's own quarters arises. Champion, Owen and Retief mentioned a "beautiful habitation" which was held up by 22 or 21 posts covered in beads. Gardiner (1966: 200) described and illustrated another large hut with nine (in the illustration) or ten (in the description) posts and no furniture, but with a clover-leaf shaped hearth. In addition, the guide book to Mgunundlovu (Oberholster & Walton, n.d.) mentions a hut with only one post, in which Dingane ate and slept. Fynn (Stuart & McMalcolm 1969) described exactly this type of situation in relation to Shaka. Shaka had various huts reserved for his own private use: one where he had his meals, one to dress in, one to sleep in, one for giving audiences, and others for storing his provisions.

Of the excavated hut floors, not a single example could have had 20 or so structural posts, and none had nine or ten as well as a clover leaf hearth. There are provision huts, however, at the eastern edge of the excavations (Figs. 12, 13 & 14), where Dingane is said to have lived and there is great variety between neighbouring hut floors. These may be very close to Dingane's own huts.

The open space between the two *isigodlo* areas may have been a cattle enclosure, but the most likely possi-

bility is that it is Smith's "dancing square".

The huts in the warrior area were completely standardized, and no linear alignment existed. This arrangement may have been preferred as a more efficient use of the space between the inner and outer fences.

If the barrack area tested was of typical density, then there should have been about 800 warrior huts. Similarly, the *isigodlo* probably contained no more than 150. It is difficult to know what percentage of recovery has been achieved, but 70% to 95% is probably reasonable. Thus, a total figure could be about 1 100 huts, exactly that suggested by Gardiner (1966).

Only seven huts in a semi-circle were located in the central *Bheje* enclosure, although Stuart's (n.d.) plan shows eight in a circle. Perhaps one hut remains undiscovered, but the excavations verify the other plans which show huts only in the upper half of the enclosure. Apart from the special architectural features in this area, the contents of the huts set them apart from the others. Metal objects were rare in the whole site, thus the brass bangles and glass beads from the *Bheje* huts indicate something special about the hut occupants. Stuart's account that only the royal family and King's beloved lived here seems most likely.

The excavated pit in the western *Bheje* circle conforms closely to the design of the traditional subsurface Zulu storage pit (Fig. 15). It seems likely that these grain pits were not located beneath a cattle enclosure as is normal (e.g. Krige 1936: 44), but were

covered by thatch overhangs and surrounded by a wooden fence. The small number and relatively small size of the pits would suggest that they were designed to deal only with *isigodlo* food requirements.

Visitors in Dingane's time reported that large amounts of beer and grain were brought to the site by relatives of the warriors, suggesting that Mgun- dlovu and other military centres were not self- supporting (confirmed in Webb and Wright 1977: 330). Champion (Booth 1967: 36) states quite emphatically that no ground was cultivated in the vicinity, but it is quite likely that Dingane's herds were of considerable importance in the provisioning of Mgun- dlovu. So much so that Gardiner noted (1966: 47) "as all the cattle folded in the military towns belong to the King, and but few are killed there in proportion to the num- bers which are daily slaughtered at the capital, this is, in consequence, the great deposit of shields, the manu- facture of which is constant and almost the only occupation of the men."

The smithing area Champion (Booth 1967) saw in 1836 was probably between the western and central *Bheje* circles where droplets of brass were found dur- ing our investigation. Champion (Booth 1967: 36) noted that "his work is wholly in brass. A very hot fire is made from the dried leaves of the aloe. Here the small brass wire is melted down into plates which again are fluted by sharp hammers on wide anvils of stone." According to Gardiner (1966: 105), the brass came from Delagoa in exchange for ivory and cattle. In a general comment, Fynn (Stuart & McMalcolm 1969: 272-3) observed that "in the working of brass they use sandstone crucibles, which are easily worked and attain a strong heat to form the beads or balls. Cowdung is placed in a circle on an aloe leaf, in the centre of which is placed a splinter of wood to form the hole by which the beads are threaded. The melted brass is then poured in, which leaves them in a very rough state, but they are afterwards beaten with a hammer and brought to form. The rings are formed also by casting narrow pigs into cowdung and the anvil stone being of a soft gritty nature, there are carved half circles for the balls to be beaten into and channels to the shape required for the neck rings when beaten out."

The schist artifact from the pit is obviously a mould which was used in the technique described by Fynn (Fig. 15). The sub-circular depressions on top must be bead moulds, and the grooves along the sides are as certainly the moulds in which bangles and neck rings were formed.

It was realised from the start that architectural and spatial information would be the most likely to have survived, as smaller objects have been removed by a succession of visitors since 1839. Even these aspects of the site have been only summarily treated here and should be expanded in future work. There are a num- ber of important details concerning the site layout which cannot as yet be clarified. These are the eastern horn of warrior huts; the location of stockades and gates; the main entrance; the location of middens; and the nature of the eastern *Bheje* enclosure. It is important to plot the eastern barracks, since assump-

tions about the location of the main entrance depend upon establishing the main axis. Moreover, the popu- lation estimate depends upon a knowledge of the sub- divisions within the horns.

The similarity between Mgun- dlovu and other military establishments such as Bulawayo, and the transition from traditional homesteads to military barrack towns remain questions for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the excavations of 1974 and 1975 we were assisted by Jeremy Baskin, Gill Bowker, Nicky Feitelson, Ivan Hannival, Johanna Parkington, Cedric Poggenpoel, Heinz R  ther, Polly Scott, Frank Silberbauer, Loubie van Regenmortel and John Wright; Mr. Chadwick of the National Monuments Council suggested we undertake the excavations; Mr. Hyde of the Natal Roads Department lent us more than one pair of hands; and the Dingaans Mission provided accom- modation. At various times Professors David Sco- gings and Colin Webb offered advice and practical assistance, and Martin Hall and Tim Maggs were indispensable colleagues. Cedric Poggenpoel drew the figures. We thank the Natal Museum for logistic support and the National Monuments Council and the University of Cape Town for financial support.

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