

Looking at first-millennium agriculturist ceramic sculpture of the South African eastern seaboard region

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Southern Africa's eastern seaboard region abounds in First-Millennium Agriculturist ceramic artefacts. Archaeological records are beginning to show that amongst predominantly utilityware prehistoric ceramics are many freely sculpted works that include fragments of engraved human figurines. Such sculptures offer intriguing palimpsests of deep past southern African lifeways, and in this paper such artefacts are discussed and some interpretations of possible social significances are explored.¹

Key words: Millenium agriculturist artifacts, prehistoric ceramica

'n Ondersoek na Eerste-Millennium Landbou-keramiekbeeldhouwerk wat aan die Suid-Afrikaanse oostelike kusgebied gevind is

Die kusgebied van suidelike Afrika is ryk aan Eerste-Millennium Landbou-keramiekartefakte. Argeologiese data begin daarop dui dat daar tussen die prehistoriese keramiekstukke wat hoofsaaklik gebruiksware was, ook talle vryelik gebeeldhoude werke is, met inbegrip van gefragmenteerde menslike figuurtjies. Sodanige beeldjies bied besonder interessante palmpseste van lewenswyses van vergane tye in suidelike Afrika en word bespreek met die oog op die verklaring van hulle moontlike sosiale betekenis.

First-Millennium (CE) Agriculturist² (FMA) Kalundu Tradition³ (figure 1) ceramics of the eastern seaboard of southern Africa have thus far been found to be predominantly deeply engraved utilityware usually used around homesteads and villages, as well as for gift and trade purposes.



Figure 1
First-Millennium Agriculturist ceramic traditions of eastern and southern Africa, including Kalundu (Whitelaw 1997: 446).

There are also indications of other powerful ritual usage practices which included deliberate post-firing partial or full surface penetration of such vessels, as well as interment as grave goods, and ceramic vessels have occasionally been used as receptacles for human infant or juvenile burials⁴.

Kalundu Tradition utilityware was thus both an intimate part of domestic hearths, being used for storage and cooking, and also integral to enactment of prevailing cosmologies and rituals associated with making sense of daily life.

Some FMA peoples were expert potters, and appear to have been amongst earliest metal-workers in southern Africa. Records also show that FMA peoples were hunters who practiced animal husbandry⁵, and cultivated crops such as millet and sorghum⁶ during the approximate timeframe of 1570 BP to 920 BP in present day Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

Settlements have been found to extend inland through to Gauteng⁷ and further up into Africa to include sites in Zimbabwe, Angola and Zambia⁸.

Southernmost finds of FMA ceramics include those at **Kayser's Beach**⁹, **Canasta Place**¹⁰ and **Kulubele**¹¹ near East London. Of these it is the site at **Kulubele** (figure 2) that is currently of keen interest to me because it is here that the most southerly settlement of FMA peoples has been partially excavated and reported on¹².

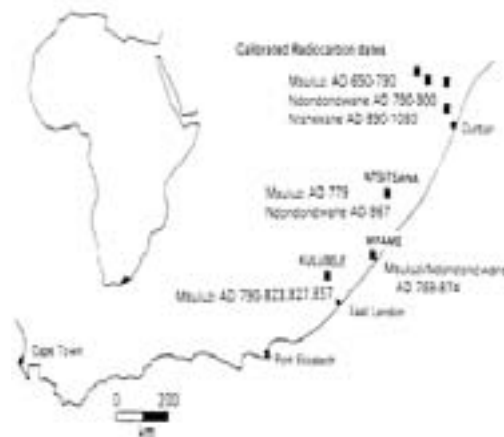


Figure 2

East coast sites, style, and radiocarbon dates (Binneman 1996a: 30). Note: Other main sites featured include **Wosi** and **Nanda**, located near **Msuluzi** in the Thukela River Basin, and **Magogo** is situated on the Mooi River before it flows into the Thukela near present town of Muden in KwaZulu-Natal. **KwaGandaganda**, on the other hand, is located slightly south of the Thukela River towards Durban, in the Mngeni river basin 22 km inland from the coast.

On recent trips by myself to **Kulubele** with Victor Biggs and Wesley Sternberg I have seen many exposed potsherds, including some dug up by an aardvark, others respectively projecting from a cattletrack, and riverbank. The site is still relatively fresh and will hopefully be excavated more comprehensively in the future, but in the meantime soil erosion is destroying important unexcavated areas such as grain pits which abound in potsherds and ash lenses (figure 3).

It is currently thought that FMA peoples did not settle much further south than **Kulubele** because their crops required summer rainfall and the East London/Port Elizabeth area is considered to be approximately on the south easterly “outer limit of [such] summer rainfall” (Binneman *et al* 1992: 108), even as far back in time as two thousand years ago (Prins 1993: 1).

Indications of prehistoric settlement at **Kulubele** were discovered in the late 1980s by local farmer and rock art enthusiast Victor Biggs who, upon finding two engraved potsherds, consulted Johan Binneman at the Albany Museum, who in turn set a process of archaeological excavation in motion. The site was visited in 1992 by Johan Binneman, Litha Webley, and Tom Huffman who unearthed more ceramics and a scatter of stones (figure 4) at the spot identified by Victor Biggs.

These stones, near the edge of a donga, indicated the top of a covered over storage pit. Binneman (1996b: 72) has explained that such pits are important discoveries because when no longer used for storing cereals, they served as ‘rubbish bins’ for domestic debris, containing a wide variety of food remains, potsherds and other domestic and everyday use-items which tell archaeologists about the way of life of the people.



Figure 3
Partially eroded storage pits at Kulubele (Photo: John Steele).



Figure 4
Kulubele: Beginning of first excavation (Photo: Victor Biggs).

In his site report Binneman also documented a 10-square-metre midden excavation, and a preliminary dig elsewhere that exposed “a daga floor” (Binneman 1996a: 29). These sites revealed extensive domestic utilityware, as well as “several small ceramic fragments ... which may have been parts of figurines”

Binneman (1996a: 31) (figure 5).

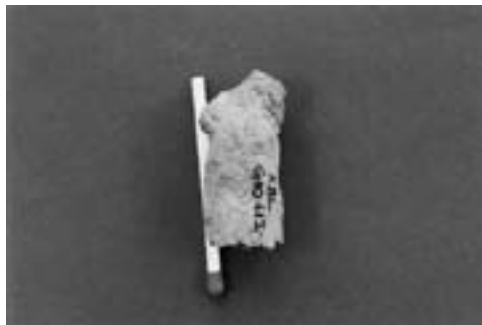


Figure 5
Kulubele: small ceramic fragment, approx 38mm x 16mm (Photo: John Steele, courtesy Albany Museum).

The site report (1996a) does not specify whether the **Kulubele** figurine fragments were discovered in one of the pits, or the midden, but it is clear that they were retrieved from within

settlement space, thus not deemed something to be disposed of extremely discreetly far away from places of usual human activity.

In order to try and get an idea of thinkings that may have motivated creation of such artefacts by people living in an everyday community of women, men and children, it is useful to look within a wider context. Small, palm-sized or less, solid clay sculpted fragments from further north at **Ntsitsana**¹³ (figure 6) and **KwaGandaganda**¹⁴ (figure 7), for example, begin to offer some such context.

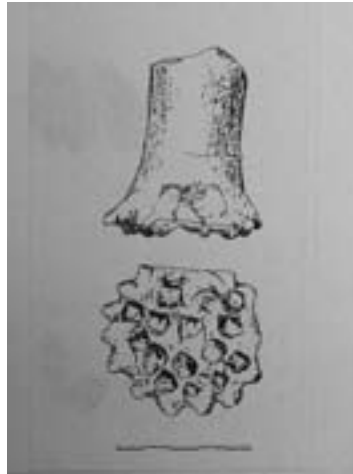


Figure 6
Ntsitsana figurine fragment, approx 80mm x 50mm (Prins & Granger 1993: 166).

Prins and Granger (1993: 165,166,170) report excavating solid figurine fragments at **Ntsitsana** in Pit 2 which was “situated at a distance from, and not directly related to the stock byre”. Whitelaw (1994: 35-38), on the other hand, reported excavating solid figurine fragments at **KwaGandaganda** from midden deposits on the southern edge of the Byre, and the Byre itself. He also reported that other sculpted fragments may have been associated with Pits 2 and 3.

Despite not actually having been found in similar spaces, these **Ntsitsana** and **KwaGandaganda** fragments have similarities in that they are solid and appear to be usually severely abstracted representations that hint at some human physical characteristics.

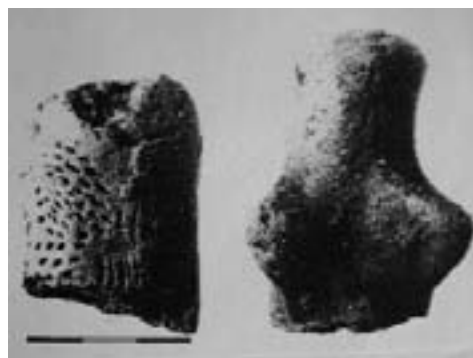


Figure 7
KwaGandaganda figurine fragments, approx 32mm x 50mm and 44mm x 55mm respectively (Whitelaw 1994: 37).

In outlining the finds at **KwaGandaganda** Gavin Whitelaw (1994: 35-38) described the objects as parts of human “figurine bodies ... having incision marks”. Stylistic lack of emphasis on exact representation of particular physical features suggests that realism was not an objective of this creative process.

These artefacts seem usually to have been modelled from a solid piece of clay, probably by a rolling and pinching/pulling method rather than by paring away subtractively from an already slightly hardened lump. Sometimes knobs or pieces of clay were attached to a basic shape, as in an example from **KwaGandaganda** (figure 8).

Characteristically, many figurines such as an example from **Wosi**¹⁵ (figure 9) seem to feature a semi-cylindrical torso fattening towards the genital area. Len van Schalkwyk (1994: 70, 71, 82) reports these fragments as having been excavated at **Wosi** Grid 11 Layer 2 which was a midden area that “appeared to have functioned as a dump site for domestic debris”.

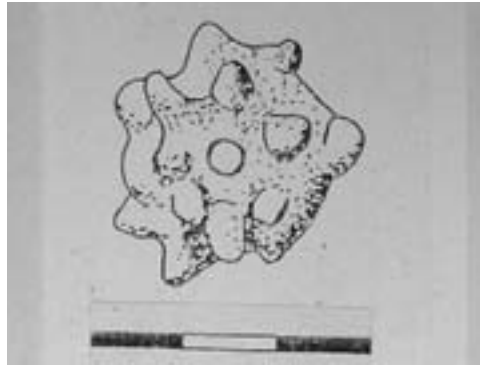


Figure 8
KwaGandaganda clay lump, approx 26mmx 26mm (Whitelaw 1994: 36)

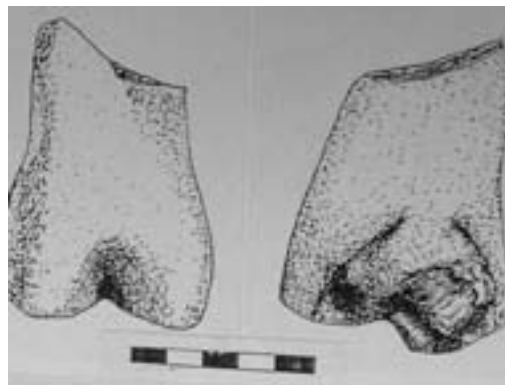


Figure 9
Wosi torso, approx 78mm x 56mm (Van Schalkwyk, L. 1994: 89).

Plump lower regions of the **Wosi** sculpture can also be observed, for instance, from **Nanda**¹⁶ (figure 10), these examples, according to Whitelaw (1993:59), probably representing “lower human torsos with stumpy legs and accentuated buttocks”.

Figurine 1 [top left] was excavated from Test Square 38 midden area (Whitelaw 1993:65). Figurine 2 [bottom left] is from Trench 4 D1, placing it in close proximity - within six meters - of two human burials and Pits 3 & 4, as well as dense concentrations of ceramics, iron working remains, worked stone, and remains of a raised granary, as well as what could be considered to be residue of pot manufacture (Whitelaw 1993: 52-55, 59,65,74,77). Figurine 3 [top and bottom right] was recovered from a pit in conjunction with a bottomless pot and large lumps of charcoal (Whitelaw 1993: 55, 59, 65). Whitelaw (1993: 59) also reported excavation of smaller figurine fragments in Burial 2 Pit, as well as Pits 3 and 4.

Worthy of noting with regard to these **Nanda** figurine fragments are the punctated impressions; the swelling, possibly indicating an umbilical hernia; and the lobes possibly representing two legs and buttocks (Whitelaw 1993: 65), giving an impression of femaleness (Whitelaw 1994: 51).

Regarding relative absence of heads to go with the various torsos Gavin Whitelaw (1994: 51) has suggested that indications are that heads may usually have been deliberately broken off prior to discard, as in the 62mm high torso from **Magogo**¹⁷ (figure 11). Various torso fragments were found at this site in three different pits, with Pit 1 also containing such items as furnace fragments, slag and tuyere, much pottery, hornfel flakes, bone, charcoal and carbonised seeds (Maggs & Ward 1984: 110,121).



Figure 10
Nanda figurine fragments, approx 42mm x 20mm; 64mm x 41mm; and 68mm x 50mm respectively (Whitelaw 1993: 65).

Rarity of heads in the archaeological record may indicate that they were disposed of separately from the torsos, perhaps entirely destroyed, or discarded outside of village space.



Figure 11
Magogo torso, approx 62mm x 60mm (Photo: John Steele, courtesy Natal Museum).

With regard to a relative absence of heads in the archaeological record an unusual find is a torso segment retrieved from the mound area at **Ndondondwane**¹⁸ (figure 12). This figurine is described as having been “broken along the line of a double row of puncta on the front of the body ... [and has] an arm or breast [that] protrudes from the intact side”

(Loubser 1993: 132). The head on this figurine is so severely abstracted that it appears more like a knob than anything else, confirming a likelihood that heads may well usually have been of secondary importance and reduced to a minimal symbol only.

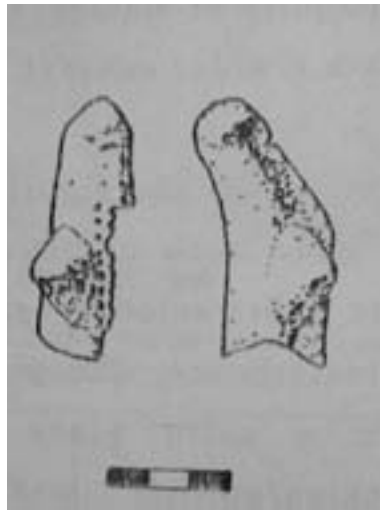


Figure 12

Ndondondwane intact head and torso segment, approx 64mm x 30mm (Loubser 1993: 146).

The mound area within which this figurine was excavated is described by Loubser (1993: 112-120, 139) as being about 16m in diameter and as having “the most prominent concentration of material at Ndondondwane”. Finds here include a smooth daga floor; a lower grinding stone with an elliptical groove; several ash lenses; daga fragments with impressions of reeds, thatch and string; a more recent daga layer nearby with pole impressions; various layers of stones; purpose made channels that indicate presence of a fence; large quantities of small ivory chips; concentrations of dumped ceramic vessels were found on the inside line of the fence, and ceramic sculpture fragments on the outside line. Other items recovered included pieces of tuyere, slag, and daga blocks.

One other figurine fragment decorated with puncta was also found in what Loubser (1993: 121, 133) calls the “dung area”, which was a livestock byre that also yielded ash, evidence of a fence, and concentrations of ceramics and bone on the outside perimeter. The “livestock byre and mound area are centrally located when compared with the line of huts further upslope”

(Loubser 1993: 141).

Some possible reasons behind what appears to usually be deliberate breakage of figurines prior to deposition have been suggested by several researchers with reference to recently observed cultural practices. Frans Prins (1993: 153), for instance, has noted that figurines recovered at **Ntsitsana** show “striking similarities to clay human figurines made as toys by Mpondomise girls”

in the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape. Remarking on the usual occurrence of breakage at the upper torso of FMA figurines, he has also suggested that “breakage may be ritual ... [that] suggests an association with initiation”.

Gavin Whitelaw (1994: 51) has largely concurred with this suggestion, adding that “ceramic or wooden figurines are used by a number of Bantu-speaking groups in initiation schools today”.¹⁹

He also cited Evers & Hammond-Tooke (1986), Inskeep & Maggs (1975), and Loubser (1993) as researchers who have argued such FMA ceramic sculpture as having possibly been “associated with rites of passage”.

Furthermore, he has drawn attention to a frequent appearance of clay body incisions on torsos, and noted that human scarification practices have been observed in the “ethnographic present” as being part of “transformation from girl to woman”²⁰ rituals. If indeed these solidly modelled FMA sculptures were in some or other way part of a transition into womanhood practice, a strong emphasis seems to have been placed on the torso zone. Such emphasis is enhanced by a frequent display of lateral, vertical and punctated clay body incisions.

Such engravings are evident on figurines from **Magogo**. In one work (figure 13), for example, the sculptor has used clay body incisions around an umbilical hernia bringing focus specifically towards a genital area, the engravings serving to conceptually link all parts of this lower torso. Such explicit use of anatomical reference possibly alluded to particular power/energy centres that were thought to have been located in these zones.

A focus on umbilical and genital regions, enhanced by plumpness, may have been associated with ideas about human reproduction, especially if these sculptures were used during the liminal phase of a rite of passage.



Figure 13

Magogo torso fragment # 1, approx 62mm x 36mm (Photo: John Steele, courtesy Natal Museum).

If indeed this and another **Magogo** figurine (figure 14) had once been part of a “rite of passage” (Whitelaw 1994: 51) associated with changes in female reproductive capacity, then considerations of potencies associated with new capacities for conception and childbirth may well have featured prominently in thinkings during times of making, using, and discard.

Furthermore, Gavin Whitelaw (1994: 51) has suggested that destruction, in the form of breakage and burial/discard, “typically symbolises an irreversible change of status ... [and may have] had a didactic function in the teaching of proper social behaviour”.

Such utilisation of figurines as part of activities geared towards meaningfully understanding lifeway changes would have probably taken place within specially designated physical spaces. In a look at spatial organisation as evidence for girls’ initiation rites at **eMgungundlovu**²¹ Roodt (1992: 9, 12) has found features that “can be interpreted as evidence of *umgongo* screens built for the purpose of secluding a girl initiate when reaching puberty. [Such seclusion took place upon] her first menstruation, and [may have lasted for] any period of up to three months”

(citing Krige 1936: 101). Perhaps it was during such a time of seclusion, if indeed such an occurrence took place during FMA times, that some of the small ceramic figurines were made, utilised and eventually deposited? Without wishing to impose an unacceptable “presentism” (Dobres 1992: 2) on matters of initiation or solid ceramic figurines, it is nonetheless useful to explore this line of thinking a little further.



Figure 14

Magogo torso fragment # 2, approx 65mm x 40mm (Photo: John Steele, courtesy Natal Museum)

Loubser (1993: 145, 147) indicated, for instance, that “a survey of historical and ethnographic literature” has shown that within some “communities male and female initiates, mainly during puberty and premarital ceremonies, are shown various sacred objects”.

Towards the end of these ceremonies the objects were “either discarded or burnt ... with the initiation lodge”²².

He is also of the opinion that evidence for a pole and branch enclosure that may have served as an initiation related structure was discovered at **Ndondondwane** “in the mound area” within which “broken ceramic figurines” had been buried. One such figurine is described as “a female body with pronounced buttocks ... The legs and breasts are broken”

(Loubser 1993: 132, 141, 146, 147) (figure 15).

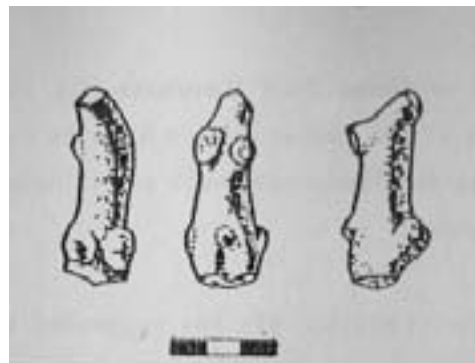


Figure 15

Ndondondwane figurine fragment, approx 64mm x 12mm (Loubser 1993: 146)

A brief survey of different types of places from which small solidly modelled figurine fragments have been retrieved show great variety, and include those found either in a pit or midden, at **Kulubele**; found in a pit at **Ntsitsana**; found in pits as well as a byre at **KwaGandaganda**; found in a midden at **Wosi**; found in pits, a midden, as well as in proximity to human burials at **Nanda**; found in mound area midden, and in a byre at **Ndondondwane**.

Such a variety of places chosen to dispose of these sculptures does perhaps call into question Loubser’s idea that separate initiation structures may have been built in those days, although it is also speculative to suggest the contrary at **Ndondondwane**. It can be noted, however, that if initiation structures were built in FMA times there is not much to suggest that this

was a widespread practice. What is also interesting is that when one looks at commonalities in deposition practices it emerges that those of disposing away from immediate domestic space – such items are not usually found in direct proximity to a hut floor - but still within communal settlement spaces, such as in pits or byres or in middens, are widespread.

Haskel Greenfield and Len van Schalkwyk (2003: 130, 131) offer some contextualisation of various significances that may have been associated with such use of space during the FMA era. Their excavations led to a conclusion that “essential elements” of a “household cluster” included that “each domestic household complex contained at least one hut, a food preparation and storage area, and a discard area”.

They further noted that at **Ndondondwane** household complexes tended to surround, at least in the form of an arc, a central zone including (2003: 133) “a livestock enclosure, and an area reserved for specialised activities associated with iron smelting, ivory working, and various rituals” clearly differentiating public and private spaces. Thus it could just as well be speculated that activities associated with figurine usage took place in private, and that special significance was attached to discreet deposition in public space, just as transition from girlhood to womanhood may be thought of as a transition to a broader spectrum of actions that could include procreation.

Even if this was not the case it is relevant, as suggested by Tom Huffman (2002: 14), that choice of deposition site would have been deliberate because ways in which people organise and use spaces has “social consequences because they provide physical backdrops for social behaviour and in some cases help to shape it”.

It thus becomes useful to note that FMA settlement layouts, such as at **Ndondondwane**, are thought by the likes of Greenfield and van Schalkwyk (2003: 133), to reflect mainly female related activities in the arc with male related activities usually occurring in “the centre of the community”.

Implications of this suggestion amplify on those alluded to earlier regarding private and public space, and that figurines were sometimes disposed of in such central spaces could perhaps be thought of as at least subliminally indicating availability to men. Yet, as tempting as such an interpretation may be it cannot possibly be complete because of the vast time-lapse and because figurines have also been found in what may have been domestic area /household middens.

It does, however, seem clear that such figurines may have been “symbols that [were] believed to have certain properties”

(Van Schalkwyk J: 2002) and were probably “used on a domestic level in the maintenance of fertility”

(Wood 2002: 92). Given the widespread presence of these sculptures and patterns of deposition it does also seem likely that making, breaking, and subsequent use of designated sites within settlement space for deposition may have symbolised irreversibility inherent in a passing of a human-age characteristic that was consciously being left behind.

Just as such ceremonial activities may have acknowledged the past and present as inextricably interlinked, so they may have also focussed on renewal and continuity, in so doing aiming at securing the future.

In conclusion, this admittedly speculative approach towards social contextualisation of FMA ceramic sculpture at least serves to enrich appreciation of such works within a wider context of possibilities open to people making sense of their existence in the coastal area of what is

now KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, more than a thousand years ago. Other similar solid clay sculptures from the deep past occur elsewhere in southern Africa, as do much larger hollow works, as well as animal and therianthropomorphic figurines. These also bear further study.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 For the sake of clarity all archaeological sites are highlighted in bold except when they occur in a direct quote.
- 2 See, for example, Hall 1992: 12; Maggs 1992: 131; Steele 2001: 35-45 for discussion and suggestions regarding suitable nomenclature.
- 3 See, for example, Binneman 1996(b); Huffman 1989: 2, 76; Steele 2001: 35, 36; 2002: 9-12; 2003: 129; and Whitelaw 1997: 446 for details.
- 4 See Steele 2004: 129-137 for an overview.
- 5 With reference to remains excavated at Kulubele, for example, Binneman (1996b: 72) has reported that “the majority of bone remains are of sheep and small antelope, the latter indicating that despite keeping domesticated animals, hunting still played an important role in their subsistence”. Extensive bovine remains have been reported from First-Millennium Agriculturalist sites further north and inland.
- 6 Binneman 1996b: 72, referring to remains excavated at Kulubele.
- 7 At, for example, Broederstroom as recorded by Mason 1973 and 1981.
- 8 Huffman 1989: 76, Whitelaw 1997: 446.
- 9 Laidler 1936 Plate XI. Kaysers Beach is located approximately 50km south of East London.
- 10 Nogwaza 1994: 103-106. Canasta Place is located 33.00S; 27.47E and is located 12 km west of East London on the west bank of the Buffalo River.
- 11 Binneman 1996 a and b; Binneman *et al* 1992, located at 27.51S; 32.25E, “on the west bank of the Great Kei river valley in the Stutterheim district ... some 200 metres below the plateau and 60 kilometres inland from the coast” (Binneman 1996a: 29).
- 12 Binneman *et al* 1992; Binneman 1996 a and b.
- 13 Ntsitsana is located at 31.04S; 29.12E.
- 14 KwaGandaganda is located at 29.40.43S; 30.50.10E.
- 15 Wosi is located at 28.54.25S; 31.01.50E, Lower Thukela Basin, downstream from Ndongondwane.
- 16 Nanda is located at 29.40.04S; 30.51.21E.
- 17 Magogo is located on the Mooi River in the Muden area (Maggs & Ward 1984: 105).
- 18 Ndongondwane is located at 28.53S; 31.01E. A fascinating reconstruction of how the “mound area” may have been used is speculated by Loubser (1993: 120) as follows: “Deposit initially accumulated as a result of activities centred around a hut in the south-eastern corner of what was to become the mound. After the abandonment of this hut, a second hut was most likely constructed slightly downhill. A roughly rectangular area was then enclosed by a wooden fence, and ash started to accumulate within. It was probably during this time that ivory and different kinds of ceramic objects were dumped in and around the enclosure. The western fence of the enclosure was apparently taken down when a furnace was built on the western slope of the mound. And, finally, pieces of the dismantled furnace were discarded against the outside of the northern fence”.
- 19 Here Whitelaw (1994: 51) cited Mönning 1967; Nettleton 1989; Richards 1945; and Stayt 1968.
- 20 Here Whitelaw (1994: 51) cited Earthy 1924-26; and Junod 1962.
- 21 “eUmgungundlovu was established in AD 1829 as the main seat and military headquarters of the Zulu king uDingane ... The settlement was located in the emaKhosini valley, which forms part of the greater White Umfolozi drainage system” (Roodt 1992: 9).
- 22 Here Loubser (1993: 147) cited Van Warmelo (1932: 74), and Hammond-Tooke (1981: 59, 76); and Krige & Krige (1980: 138).

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