

CHAPTER III

DEFINING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As has been defined in previous chapters, the salt production at Baleni is analysed within the specific spatio-temporal framework of the South African Early Iron Age (EIA). EIA communities are associated with the introduction of farming, distinctive ceramics, metallurgical knowledge and the period roughly covering the first 1000 years AD. The earliest phases of salt production, which form the focus of this study, are specifically associated with communities that made ceramics from the Urewe tradition. This chapter will define the culture-historical framework of the dissertation and discuss some of the relevant academic discourse on Iron Age studies in South Africa.

The Early Iron Age of South Africa

The culture historical sequence for the South African Iron Age is primarily based on the association between types of ceramic assemblages and radiocarbon dates. The concern with creating a regional chronology for the Iron Age has over the years led to several competing hypotheses concerning the relationship between the various ceramic groups. One approach has been associated with Gordon Childe's concept of culture (Hall 1990: 70). Childe viewed culture as certain types of remains (such as pots, implements, burial rites, house forms etc.) seen as a package that constantly recurs together. He stressed that each culture had to be delineated individually in terms of constituent artefacts and that cultures could not be defined simply by subdividing ages or epochs either spatially or temporally. Instead the geographical limits of each culture had to be established empirically and individual cultures aligned chronologically by stratigraphy and seriations. South African archaeologists who had their roots in this approach were Mason (1962) and Maggs (1980a, 1980b, 1984b). In contrast to this approach, Huffman (1974, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1989a, 1989b) introduced the concept of the ceramic *tradition* in the 1970's, which was already well established in American archaeology (Hall 1984: 267). This method entails a detailed analysis of ceramic attributes, which are summarized statistically and built into models that trace traditions through space and time. By identifying traditions rather than cultures, Huffman mapped a complex set of ceramic traditions that accounted for the ceramic variability of southern Africa. Huffman and

Evers approach ceramic design as part of a much larger visual code (Evers 1989: 129-130; Evers and Huffman 1988: 740). This means that ceramic design can be used to identify groups of people who share, learn and transmit the same code. The large areas of ceramic uniformity often observed by archaeologists are frequently punctuated by a great change in ceramic style over short distances. Huffman believes this reflects changes in verbal communication (i.e. language). Ceramics can therefore trace the movement of people on the landscape.

A major critique of the view that ceramic style correlates to distinct groups of people sharing a common cultural code, is that it encourages a migrationist view of cultural change and that it de-emphasises internal dynamics. Although such an approach cannot be dismissed out of prejudice, the archaeologist should consider alternative explanations for change and variability in the material culture and also try to explain why movements occurred (Mitchell 2002: 270). Hall (1983) warns that the emphasis on ceramic typologies creates the risk that attention will be drawn away from more historic and anthropological questions. Bearing this in mind, the approach adopted in this study is that ceramic typologies are a useful tool when considering units of space and time (cf. Mitchell 2002: 270), but that it can also address issues wider than mere temporal classification.

Ceramic Sequences

Using ceramic traditions, Huffman (1989a) presented an interpretation that grouped all the ceramic assemblages of the Early Iron Age under the Chifumbaze Ceramic Complex. Archaeologists postulate that the distinct traditions within this complex are the result of early farmers migrating from the north in two streams; a western (Kalundu) and an eastern stream (Urewe), the latter containing two separate facies. This model is largely a development of an earlier synthesis by Phillipson (1977, 1985) who placed all the southern African first millennium sites into an eastern stream, of which two facies, a highland and lowland, were represented in South Africa.

The first tradition to reach southern Africa was the Urewe tradition and it is divided into the Kwale and Nkope branches. The Kwale branch extends along the East African coast from Kenya to KwaZulu-Natal. The Nkope branch extends from southern Tanzania through Malawi and eastern Zambia into Zimbabwe. The second tradition, Kalundu, is found from Angola in the west through western Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe into South Africa

(Huffman 1989a). At Baleni there is no chronological overlap between the Kwale and Kalundu traditions, therefore, as discussed in Chapter I, this dissertation specifically deals with communities associated with ceramics from the Urewe tradition's Kwale branch.

The Kwale Tradition

In South Africa, the Kwale branch can be divided into two phases (Huffman 1989a). The first phase, dated between AD 280 - 420, is termed Silver Leaves, or Matola by Maggs (1980a, 1984b). Silver Leaves sites have been found along the east coast near Maputo (Morais 1988) as well as in the interior at the Silver Leaves name site (Klapwijk 1974), Castle Cavern in Swaziland (Dart and Beaumont 1968), Zimbabwe (Sinclair *et al.* 1993) and at Ma 38 in the Kruger National Park (Meyer 1986). Silver Leaves assemblages have a high proportion of fluted rims on bowls and bevelled rims on jars (Klapwijk and Huffman 1996). The Silver Leaves ceramics are only marginally younger than the closely associated Kwale assemblages from Kenya, which indicates a rapid spread down the east coast, possibly by boat (Klapwijk 1974: 22). During the mid-fifth century AD Silver Leaves gives rise to a new ceramic entity known as Mzonjani. In general, the Mzonjani assemblages display continuity in profile and design layout with Silver Leaves, but lack the distinctive bevels and flutes of the latter. In the northern Lowveld, assemblages have been excavated at Silver Leaves (Klapwijk and Huffman 1996), Eiland (Evers 1981) and the Kruger National Park (Meyer 1986). Most Mzonjani settlements are, however, concentrated along the coastal belt of KwaZulu-Natal (Whitelaw and Moon 1996). Of the six sites associated with Kwale ceramics in the Kruger National Park, Meyer (1986) places three southern sites (Tsh1, Mal10, St6) into a Mutlumuvi Complex and Le7, Ma32 and Mo8 in the north are placed into an Early Eiland Complex. Both phases are seen as northern and southern variants of the same ceramic entity, which Meyer believes to have developed from earlier Silver Leaves. Consequently, Meyer's Early Eiland Industry and Mutlumuvi, are very similar to Mzonjani ceramics, and can be classed as such.

Economic and Social Aspects of Early Iron Age Society

Settlements with Urewe ceramics were all located within the savannah eco-zones of southern Africa. Settlements were mostly located on deep arable soil close to rivers or streams. Sites near the coast indicate that marine resources were also exploited. Shell middens identified along the coast served as collection points for villages situated further inland (Horwitz *et al.* 1991; Maggs 1984b). Communities were heavily dependent on domesticated animals for

meat. Hunting played a variable role in the subsistence economy. Faunal remains from sites in the Lowveld region indicate that here, hunting fulfilled a major dietary role, more so than in other regions. This could be due to the animal diseases endemic to the area. The most important of these were nagana, carried by the tse-tse fly (*Glossina* spp.), malignant catarrhal fever (MCF), foot-and-mouth disease, as well as various tick-borne diseases (Plug 1988: 313).

Although no dedicated archaeobotanical study has been done for the EIA, indications are that cereals formed the staple diet. Domesticated species that were cultivated include pearl millet (*Pennisetum americanum*), finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) and sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*). (Hanisch 1981; Klapwijk 1974; Maggs 1984a; Maggs and Ward 1984). These were likely the principal crops during this early time period.

An analysis of site locations seems to suggest an apparent link between settlements and iron ore bodies. This relationship has led some archaeologists to suggest that ore-procurement strategies were mostly small in scale. This, and the lack of abundant ironworking residue on settlements, suggests that iron production was primarily intended for consumption within the village (Whitelaw and Moon 1996: 70).

Two largely contradictory models are used to explain community organization during the Early Iron Age. Hall interprets EIA society as possessing a Primitive Communist or “domestic” (Hall 1987b:73) mode of production. Villages were bound in a balanced reciprocal relationship without the opportunity to accumulate power. Although EIA communities were economically self sufficient, ecological instability, resource failure and limited storage of resources, necessitated secure reciprocal relations. Thus, economic and social interaction primarily took place within the village while wider ranging connections were called on to supplement resources in times of hardship. These connections were signified by shared codes of ceramic decoration (Hall 1987a: 7-9; Hall 1987b: 73).

In contrast, Huffman (1993), Whitelaw (1994) and others (e.g. Denbow 1983, 1984), drawing on ethnographically derived models first proposed by Kuper (1980), have argued that EIA production was organised around a community-wide mode of production. This thesis revolves around the spatial organization of settlements, generally referred to as the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP). The application of the CCP rests on the premises that (1) human society organizes its environment into discrete physical spaces where only a limited range of activities are permitted, and (2) that spatial locations have social significance and

provide the physical setting for a specific set of human activities (Huffman 2001). The fundamental aspect of the CCP is the integrating role that cattle played in social life. Cattle were owned by men, and used for bridewealth payments, sacrifice to ancestors, and in establishing and sustaining political relationships. This is reflected in the internal structure of settlements. Settlements were organised into outer and inner zones. The outer residential zone, is the domain of married women and incorporates the households of individual women. This zone would normally include sleeping huts, kitchens, grain bins and graves. The second zone is the inner, male dominated area. This zone contains stock kraals, public smith areas, high status burials placed below or close to the central byre, the men's court and communal grain storage facilities controlled by the leader of the settlement. The CCP is restricted to Eastern Bantu speakers who are patrilineal, prefer cattle as a form of bridewealth, and have male hereditary leadership and beliefs centred on the role of ancestors in daily life (Huffman 2001: 21).

Archaeologically, the CCP can be identified by open central areas, surrounded by houses and grain bins with storage pits in and around cattle kraals that contain prestige burials. Status of burials is determined by burial position and grave contents. Burials that are in a sitting position and that contain ivory grave goods are usually recognised as being those of high status. First millennium sites where these features have been identified include Broederstroom (Huffman 1998), Riverside (Huffman 1993) and KwaGandaganda (Whitelaw 1994/1995). Since the CCP has been identified on sites associated with both the Kwale and Kalundu EIA ceramic traditions, Huffman (2001: 30) believes that the CCP was already a feature of EIA society when these communities entered southern Africa. The relationship between settlement size and political importance observed in traditional Bantu society is also implied by the CCP. The leader is the wealthiest person in society, since he owns the most cattle, accumulated through death dues, court fines, forfeits, tribute, raids and brideprice (Huffman 1986). The usefulness of this correlation in EIA archaeology is hampered by poor preservation and reoccupation of sites. Although Urewe settlements are generally smaller than those of later EIA phases, being typically two hectares or more in extent (Maggs 1984b), large Urewe sites evidently did exist as is indicated by the 5th to 7th century settlement of Broederstroom which was inhabited by at least 200 to 300 individuals (Huffman 1993: 226). The presence of the CCP in EIA society implies that these communities were probably

hierarchically organised societies with hereditary leaders and that production was probably organized on a communal level.

Despite archaeological evidence from EIA sites like Broederstroom (Huffman 1993), and KwaGandaganda (Whitelaw 1994), the presence of the CCP in the EIA is contested by some archaeologists (e.g. Hall 1986; Lane 1994/1995; Maggs 1994/1995). Hall (1986) believes that the scarcity of cattle in faunal assemblages means that they could not have been used in political transactions and bridewealth at that time. Archaeologically the presence of one cow may, however, indicate a breeding population of at least 100 (Huffman 1998) and the social importance of cattle is not necessarily reflected in numbers (Mitchell 2002: 283). Maggs (1994/1995) disputes the presence of the CCP before AD1000 on the grounds of a break in cultural practises such as dental mutilation, fish eating, settlement location and settlement longevity. Huffman (2001: 30) feels that these traits do not form part of the organizing principles of the CCP and are therefore low level differences in cultural practises, not covered by the CCP. A further objection concerns that of metal production. Maggs (1994/1995) feels that iron was forged and smelted within the settlement in contrast to more recent practise where smelting activities are secluded while forging takes place in public places. Evidence for smelting within the settlement is the presence of furnace walls and iron slag. Huffman (2001: 31) questions the usefulness of this data since the precise spatial relationship between the forge areas and the rest of the settlement is unclear. In the absence of such data, smelting could therefore have taken place within isolated ritual enclosures or outside the settlement boundaries.

The recognition of the CCP resolves many aspects regarding the socio-economic organization of EIA settlements. Questions remain regarding the economic organization around natural resources. An aspect of the EIA economy that has long been recognised, is salt production. Three sites in the northern Lowveld, all within a 100km radius from Baleni, have been identified as areas of EIA salt production (Evers 1974, 1981). These studies were, as most archaeological research of the period, primarily concerned with the creation of a culture historical sequence for the region. Salt production sites provide an opportunity for the archaeologist to investigate production during the EIA. A common aspect of archaeological research on salt production sites, have been the use of traditional salt making practises to inform the archaeological data (e.g. Connah 1991; Evers 1981; Fagan and Yellen 1968; Gouletquer 1975; Sutton and Roberts 1968). The next chapter reviews some

archaeological approaches to salt production sites as well as Africanist research on the various sources and methods utilised in traditional salt production.