

**THE SALT OF BALENI:
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE
ORGANIZATION OF PRODUCTION DURING THE
EARLY IRON AGE OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

The study elucidates the character of salt production during the Early Iron Age of South Africa in terms of the context, concentration and intensity of production. The focus is on the organization of production activities at the Baleni geothermal spring by communities associated with the Kwale ceramic tradition.

Ethnographic, archaeological and historical accounts of salt production activities in Africa provide a comparative body of knowledge to weigh against the archaeological data from Baleni.

Archaeological salt production activities at Baleni is concentrated around the Baleni spring and associated swamp. Prehistoric salt production is characterised by artificial earthen mounds that contain production debris. Excavations of these mounds uncovered evidence comparable to the ethnographic and historical accounts. Salt producers at Baleni collected the salt crust around the swamp after which it was placed in a basket type filter and leached with water to produce brine. The last production step was to reduce brine over an open fire at the saltworking site.

Surveys around the swamp identified two Early Iron Age settlements. These sites were atypical and did not contain features normally associated with Early Iron Age settlements. Excavations indicate that they were temporary encampments within which salt production took place.

Salt production ceramic assemblages are characterised by the limited use of vessel types and a high variability in vessel sizes. The majority of pots also display signs of interior pitting due to the caustic nature of the brine. The Baleni assemblages are very similar to assemblages from contemporary Early Iron Age settlements. The data suggests that salt production during the Early Iron Age did not make use of specialised tools.

The unspecialised production tools, small groups of producers and the seemingly small scale of production indicate a general theme of low capital investment, which is consistent with salt being produced by independent specialists. EIA salt producers at Baleni were not concentrated within a single community, but spread throughout the immediate consumer

population. The inexpensive methods of salt production lend support to a view of salt production as a low intensity and part-time or seasonal activity.

Keywords:

Baleni, salt, production, organization of production, Early Iron Age, Mzonjani, Kwale, ceramic, use-wear, independent producers, Lowveld, South Africa, archaeology

OPSOMMING

Die studie analiseer sout produksie gedurende die Vroeë Yster Tydperk van Suid Afrika in terme van die konteks, konsentrasie en intensiteit van produksie. Die fokus is op die organiseering van produksie aktiwiteite rondom die Baleni warmwaterbron deur gemeenskappe wat geassosieer word met die Kwale potwerk tradisie.

Etnografiese, argeologiese en historiese bronne wat sout produksie in Afrika beskryf, word gebruik as vergelykende gegewens om die argeologiese data van Baleni te interpreteer.

Argeologiese sout produksie aktiwiteite by Baleni is gekonsentreer rondom die warmwater fontein en die vlei waarin dit vloei. Prehistoriese sout produksie word gekenmerk deur mens gemaakte grondhope. Opgrawings van die hope bewys dat argeologiese sout produksie metodes, vergelyk kan word met historiese en etnografiese beskrywings van soortgelyke prosesse. Soutmakers by Baleni het die sout kors wat rondom die waterlyn van die vlei vorm bymekaar gemaak. Die kors is daarna in 'n mandjie-tipe filtreerder geplaas en gedelg met water om soutwater te maak. Die laaste stap was om die soutwater tot sout te reduseer in 'n kleipot oor 'n oop vuur.

Verkenning rondom die vlei het twee Vroeë Yster Tydperk nedersettings geïdentifiseer. Die terreine het geen van die kenmerke wat gewoonlik met kontemporêre nedersettings van hierdie tydperk geassosieer word, getoon nie. Opgrawings toon dat beide terreine tydelike nedersettings was waarin sout produksie plaasgevind het.

Die Baleni kleipot versamelings wat geassosieer word met sout produksie, word gekenmerk deur die beperkte gebruik van pot vorms en 'n groot variasie in pot groottes. Die meerderheid potte se binnekante is ook geërodeer as gevolg van kontak met gekonsentreerde soutwater. Die pot versameling stem grootliks ooreen met dié van kontemporêre Vroeë Yster Tydperk nedersettings. Die resultate impliseer dat sout produksie gedurende die Vroeë Yster Tydperk nie gebruik gemaak het van gespesialiseerde produksie tegnologie nie.

Die ongespesialiseerde produksie metodes, die klein groepe produsente en die klein produksie uitset, dui aan dat sout produksie 'n lae kapitale inset aktiwiteit was. Dit dui aan dat onafhanklike produsente sout gemaak het. Vroeë Yster Tydperk sout produksie was ook nie

gekonsentreerd in een gemeenskap nie, maar verspreid oor die verbruiker populasie. Die goedkoop soutmaak metodes impliseer dat produksie 'n tydelike of seisoenale, lae intensiteit aktiwiteit was.

Sleutelwoorde:

Baleni, sout, produksie, organsering van produksie, Vroeë Yster Tydperk, Mzonjani, Kwale, potwerk, gebruiksmark analise, Laeveld, Suid Afrika, argeologie

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During the first year of research in 2003, I was actively involved in fieldwork at Baleni and the Giyani area. During this period Petra Terblanche from the Tsonga Kraal Museum, provided me with accommodation and helped in formulating the research. Her intimate knowledge of Baleni and her relationship with modern day saltmakers were always of great help and interest to me. I also appreciate the help Mr. Solomon Machaba who acted as translator. During this fieldwork period in the Lowveld, two people in particular were very influential in my research: I am deeply grateful to Doctor Harold Braack and Ruth McGuire, for sharing their wealth of knowledge with me. I also value the friendship of Judy Groenewald with whom I explored the Lowveld during this period.

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CONTENTS

I. Baleni and Early Iron Age Salt Production	1
Introduction	1
Salt Production at Baleni.....	2
The Organization of Early Salt Production at Baleni.....	4
Context of Production.....	5
Concentration of Production.....	6
Intensity of Production	6
The Technology of Salt Production.....	6
Identifying Context, Concentration and Intensity	8
Frameworks.....	9
II. The Study Area	11
The Study Area	11
Biome.....	13
Climate and Rainfall.....	13
Topography, Geology and Soils	13
Fauna and Flora.....	13
The Baleni Thermal Spring.....	14
Other Hydrological Features.....	18
Implications for Agro-Pastoral Communities of the Iron Age	20
Conclusion.....	20

III. Defining the Archaeological Framework	22
The Early Iron Age of South Africa	22
Ceramic Sequences	23
Economic and Social Aspects of Early Iron Age Society	24
IV. The Archaeology of Salt Production	29
Salt Sources and Methods of Production: Examples from Africa	29
Other Archaeological Examples	30
Unprocessed Salt Collecting	32
Leaching Devices	33
Leaching from Plants	34
Salt Gardens	34
Solar Evaporation	35
Brine Boiling	35
Salt Production at Baleni	36
Background	37
Salt Extraction Methods at Baleni	37
Remarks	41
V. Archaeological Research at the Baleni Thermal Spring	43
Areas of Salt Production	43
Excavation Methodology	47
Excavation BAL01	49
Excavation BAL02	52
Excavation BAL03	55
Producing Communities at Baleni	62
Survey Methodology	62

Survey Adequacy	63
Settlement BS04.....	66
Settlement BS05.....	69
Occupation at Baleni during the Early First Millennium AD.....	76
VI. Ceramic Analysis _____	78
Typological Sequence of Ceramics from Baleni.....	78
The Letaba Assemblage	79
Eiland/Kgopolwe.....	81
Mzonjani and Silver Leaves	84
Regional Comparisons.....	88
Morphological Variances and Use-Wear	92
Decorated and Undecorated Ceramics	92
Use-Wear.....	93
Morphological Variances	97
Summary	102
VII. Discussion and Conclusion: Salt Production in The Early Iron	
Age of South Africa _____	103
The Demand for Salt.....	103
Context: Independent Producers	104
Concentration: Non-nucleated Production.....	106
Intensity: Seasonal Exploitation at Baleni.....	107
Conclusion.....	109
Bibliography _____	115
Appendix A _____	127

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The location of Baleni within the Giyani Municipal District.	11
Figure 2: Baleni in regional context.....	12
Figure 3: The reed covered swamp into which the main spring at Baleni flows.....	15
Figure 4: Minor spring located in an open depression.	16
Figure 5: The Baleni spring and associated features	17
Figure 6: Salt crust formed in basin of non-perennial river.....	18
Figure 7: Vertical erosion of stream banks south-east of the swamp.....	19
Figure 8: Steps in filter construction.....	38
Figure 9: Salt filter at Baleni.....	38
Figure 10: View of woven basket in which the collected salt crust is placed.	39
Figure 11: Typical salt production workshop at Baleni.....	40
Figure 12: Salt cone produced at Baleni.....	41
Figure 13: Ceramic fragments visible on the surface of a salt production mound.	42
Figure 14: Location of mounds of salt making activity areas.....	44
Figure 15: Mound formed of leached out filter contentl.	45
Figure 16: Trend surface map of the density salt making production activities.	46
Figure 17: Location of excavations of salt production areas.....	48
Figure 18: South-west profile of BAL01 before it was cleared.....	49

Figure 19: South-west profile of BAL01 after it was cleared.	50
Figure 20: Shard weight and the number of shards at BAL01.....	50
Figure 21: North-east profile of BAL01 at the end of excavation.	51
Figure 22: BAL02 prior to excavation.	52
Figure 23: BAL02 north-east profile.....	53
Figure 24: Cleared south-east profile before excavation.	54
Figure 25: Ceramic weight per spit of BAL02.	54
Figure 26: View of the BAL03 mound area.	55
Figure 27: Site map of BAL03.....	56
Figure 28: BAL03 Event 1.....	57
Figure 29: BAL03 Event 2.....	58
Figure 30: BAL03 Event 3.....	59
Figure 31: BAL03 Event 4.....	59
Figure 32: BAL03 Event 5.....	60
Figure 33: Weight of ceramic shards per spit.....	61
Figure 34: Number of ceramic shards per spit.....	61
Figure 35: Survey transects and area covered by survey.	64
Figure 36: Settlements identified during survey.....	65
Figure 37: Ceramic material exposed in sidewall of donga.....	67
Figure 38: Sidewall of donga that cuts through BS04.....	67
Figure 39: BS04 with associated hut rubble and ceramic scatters	68

Figure 40: View of BS05 from west to east.....	69
Figure 41 BS05 site map and location of excavations.....	70
Figure 42: Shovel test pits at BS05.....	72
Figure 43: Trend surface map of ceramic density.....	73
Figure 44: Ceramic weights from shovel test pits.....	74
Figure 45: Post impression in daga.....	75
Figure 46: Distribution of decorated against that of undecorated vessels.....	93
Figure 47: Comparisons between pitted vessels and vessels without pitting.....	94
Figure 48: Interior pitting on salt production vessel.....	94
Figure 49: Interior pitting on salt production vessel.....	95
Figure 50: Interior pitting on ceramic vessel.....	95
Figure 51: Percentage of ceramic fragments with soot from BAL03.....	96
Figure 52: Percentage of ceramic fragments with soot from BAL01.....	96
Figure 53: Vessel dimensions and the number of measurements taken.....	97
Figure 54: Intra-assemblage differences of maximum inflection diameter.....	99
Figure 55: Intra-assemblage differences of orifice diameter.....	99
Figure 56: Intra-assemblage differences of inflection diameter.....	99
Figure 57: Standard deviations of measurements taken on Kwale vessels.....	100
Figure 58: Coefficient of Variation of measurements taken on Kwale vessels.....	100
Figure 59: Letaba Class 3 vessels.....	127
Figure 60: Letaba Class 2 vessels.....	128

Figure 61: Letaba Class 1 vessels.	129
Figure 62: Letaba Class 1 vessels.	130
Figure 63: Letaba Class 1 vessels.	131
Figure 64: Eiland Class 1 vessel.	132
Figure 65: Eiland Class 2 vessel.	132
Figure 66: Eiland Class 3 vessels.....	133
Figure 67: Eiland Class 4 vessel.	133
Figure 68: Eiland Class 5 vessel.....	134
Figure 69: Eiland Class 6 vessel.	134
Figure 70: Eiland Class 7 fragment.	134
Figure 71: Mzonjani Class 1 vessels from BAL01.....	135
Figure 72: Mzonjani Class 1 vessels from BAL01.....	136
Figure 73: Mzonjani Class 1 vessels from BAL03.....	137
Figure 74: Mzonjani Class 1 vessels from BAL03.....	138
Figure 75: Mzonjani Class 1 vessels from BAL03.....	139
Figure 76: Mzonjani Class 1 vessels from BS05.	140
Figure 77: Mzonjani Class 2 vessels. from BAL01, and BAL03.....	141
Figure 78: Mzonjani Class 2 vessels from BAL03.....	142
Figure 79: Mzonjani Class 2 vessels, from BS05 and BAL03.	143
Figure 80: Mzonjani Class 3 vessels all from BS04.	144
Figure 81: Mzonjani Class 4 vessel from BS05.	145

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Mineral content of the Baleni spring.....	16
Table 2: Sigma ranges of dates from Event 2 and Event 3.....	83
Table 3: Distribution of Mzonjani/Silver Leaves Ceramic Classes.....	87
Table 4: Similarity scores between the various excavations at Baleni.....	87
Table 5: Comparisons between multidimensional classes from Baleni and contemporary Mzonjani settlements.	89
Table 6: Dates from selected EIA sites mentioned in text.....	91
Table 7 Number of decorated and undecorated vessels from each assemblage	92
Table 8: Percentage values of pitted and non-pitted vessels from the four Mzonjani assemblages.	94
Table 9: Measurements of morphological attributes taken on vessels from the four EIA assemblages from Baleni.....	98