# DIGGING HISTORY: AN INTERACTION OF ARCHAEOLOGY WITH SCHOOL HISTORY IN A MUSEUM EDUCATION CONTEXT

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Kimberley's McGregor Museum offers an introduction to archaeology as an extension of its education programme. Archaeology is the study of the material traces of man's existence. Unconstrained by the limitations of the written word, therefore, it supplements history in important ways. The major museums have a unique educational role in this respect, having the expertise, environmental resources and, above all, real artefacts in collections which students can themselves handle and experience. The aims of the archaeological programme, which interacts with school history and links into the history of the Diamond Fields, are set out. The contents of introductory talks and field visits, and a broad outline of the archaeology of Nooitgedacht, a local site museum, are briefly sketched. Finally, the programme is evaluated in terms of schools' responses. Archaeology serves the future by enlightening the history of all people.

## INTRODUCTION: HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND THE MUSEUM

"To look at the history of South Africa as it is taught in our schools is to look at human events through the wrong end of a telescope." So claimed Professor Nikolaas van der Merwe (1976, p.14), archaeologist at the University of Cape Town (see also Smith, 1983; Mazel & Stewart, 1987). Written history here is a mere few centuries old, he continued. But a somehwat different perspective has been revealed by archaeologists who, by studying the material traces of man's existence, delve beyond the limitations of the written word.

Their version of technological development in Southern Africa; for instance, reaches back at least a thousand times the 500 years since Diaz. Indeed, they have revealed some of the earliest stirrings of humanity in Africa - around four million years ago - and tracked the later spread of people from this continent to inhabit the rest of the world. They have followed the development of technologies right up to recent times when we have included ceramics, metals and other materials in our more sophisticated toolkits (e.g. Inskeep, 1978; Gould & Schiffer, 1981; Mason, 1987). By subjecting old bones and stones and rusted iron - amongst other things - to impressive analyses, they have deduced how human societies and various aspects of culture and economy have evolved.

Near the 'top' end of the archaeological time scale in Southern Africa, a great deal of knowledge has been generated about communities who lived here in pre-colonial and early colonial times. Information like this makes for challenging interactions with other disciplines, not least history.

Revil Mason's (1987) work in Johannesburg, in particular, brings out the value of archaeology in education. Apart from extending historical knowledge into 'prehistoric' time, archaeological observations have been used, for example, to complement the often flimsy written records of dynamic colonial frontiers (e.g. Parkington & Cronin, 1979). And they have been used to test lofty historical 'facts', such as the timing of the southward penetration of Black communities who, by AD 250, had introduced to South Africa an Iron Age technology, settled village life and agropastoral farming (e.g. Nisbet *et al.*, 1985; Hall, 1987; Mason, 1987; Mazel & Stewart, 1987).

Museums with archaeology departments are ideally situated to fuel important interactions between archaeology and history. Here researchers conduct original studies, involving excavations, analysis and publication of results. They also curate vast collections which include specimens used in displays and the museum's education programme. It is this facility, the real objects from collections which students can themselves handle, that lends museums their unique role in education.

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE MC GREGOR MUSEUM'S EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Kimberley's McGregor Museum has, through contact with teachers, achieved a good relationship with schools, both locally and from other centres. Drawing on museum expertise, the wealth of natural and cultural history specimens in its collections and the environmental resources of the region, it has been able to offer programmes which supplement school education on a broad front (e.g. Lloyd, 1986).

The current involvement of archaeology in museum education has evolved from occasional, small behind-the-scenes visits by school groups, towards a broader range of more regular activities which now include an excursion to our site museum at Nooitgedacht. Adult education, too, was served in 1987 with a five-lecture course and field trip which was enthusiastically supported. This year one local high school has formed an 'Archaeology and African Studies Group' which, in collaboration with the museum, is planning a variety of activities which will probably include actual fieldwork. Additionally, illustrated lectures on the prehistory of Southern Africa and the Kimberley region, with a field trip to Nooitgedacht, are being integrated into the syllabus, as part of an enrichment programme, for Std. six history pupils at that school (Owen, 1988). In many cases the intitial interest of teachers has been crucial to this interaction. Closer contact with schools would probably broaden our audience considerably.

Through hands-on experience of artefacts and an understanding of methods, participants should gain an appreciation of how archaeological - or historical - interpretations are constructed. This is one of the aims. Another is to provide the broad outlines - as they are now understood - of the prehistory of Southern Africa and of the Northern Cape in particular.

### Introductory talks:

An approximately half-hour introduction to archaeology is offered for behind-the-scenes visits by school groups, mainly of Std. six to ten pupils. It is structured around the processes of archaeological discovery and museum research.

### Lecture content

Following an outline of what archaeology is, and of the basic principles, sections deal with fieldwork and excavation; documentation (on-site and at the museum); analysis and research; and, finally,

report-writing, display and publication of results (Humphreys, 1986).

Each step is illustrated with objects and photographs: excavation equipment - trowels, buckets and sieves; field notes; artefacts - of stone, bone, metal and pottery; accession cards; unsorted collections; objects classified in different ways to yield different sorts of data; laboratory equipment; samples used for dating, or for recovering information on prehistoric diet, or climate, etc; and a selection of journals and books presenting research conclusions.

Ways of identifying stone age artefacts are demonstrated. Hands-on experience is encouraged and a four-page information back-up leaflet, summarising the major points, is distributed.

Focus on the 'how'

The traditional approach to history in schools has been to treat it as a finite subject with definite right and wrong answers: names, places, dates, and so on.

The emphasis in these introductory talks, by contrast, is not on what we know about the past, but on *how* we know what we know. It is felt that if pupils can view archaeology - or history - and the ways we interpret it, from a processual angle - if they can be exposed to the often incomplete or ambiguous or biased primary sources, and to the actual methods of investigating the past - they will find that the past can never be totally known, that their subject is by no means the whole 'truth', and that historians and archaeologists will always be revising their versions of the past in the light of new evidence or new ways of looking at the past (e.g. Leone, 1983; Parkington & Smith, 1986).

Out of the very interaction between history and archaeology in this country have come new perspectives and revised historical interpretations (e.g. Nisbet *et al.*, 1985; Cameron & Spies, 1986). A healthy awareness of one's premises and assumptions is an important requirement for any student in any discipline.

Field visits

The introductory talks are ideally followed up by more content-orientated field visits to our site museum at Nooitgedacht. The site is situated on the banks of the Vaal River near Barkly West and is well known for its glacial pavements, striated by vast glaciers which ground their way through this region 290 million years ago. The site display interprets and gives background to these epic geological events, and is of environmental interest beyond archaeology and history.

Diamonds and disputes

The gradual deposition of diamond-bearing gravels and silts along the lower reaches of the Vaal River is also given prominence in the exhibit. It was the discovery of alluvial gems in these deposits in the late 1860s which prompted the diamond rush of 1870, bringing tens of thousands of people - and dramatically increased historical visibility - to this arid area.

The resultant land dispute is writ large in school history texts. Nooitgedacht itself was the site of an early meeting between some of the contending parties (Roberts, 1976, p.30), but, actually, the area had been a disputed one for some time: "It was like a jigsaw puzzle", Brian Roberts observes, "in which no pieces fitted precisely." (1976, p.26).

However, most historical studies of the ensuing events have done so principally in terms of the conflicting claims of the Afrikaner republics and those - via Arnot's Griqua petitions - of the Cape imperialists. There is little, if any, consideration of the San, Korana, Southern Tswana or even Griqua communities, not to mention other elements like the Bergenaars, or the sundry traders and missionaries, all of whom, as pieces in Roberts' jigsaw, jostled for a place in the region in the years - in some cases centuries - leading up to, and during, the disputes of the 1870s.

Some of this history can be sketched from the records of a few early travellers and missionaries to the area; and ethnography has been used to flesh out further details (e.g. Lye & Murray, 1980; Shillington, 1985). But to go beyond these sketches, and to reach further back in time, one must turn to archaeology.

The ancient past to the eve of history

On these field visits, pupils are shown that the gravels and silts at Nooitgedacht, accumulated over long periods of time, contain artefacts of different types. These indicate that people have in fact been living here, on and off, for almost half a million years. Permanent water and an abundance of game would have made this stretch of the Vaal River an attractive focus for human occupation at various times in the past.

Nearby there are huge occurrences of Earlier Stone Age material including 'handaxes' and 'cleavers' - heavy tools made from cobbles of andesite rock. They range through the period 400 000 BC to 200 000 BC and were made by our ancient ancestors, *Homo erectus*. Bones of extinct animals found along with the artefacts give clues to the age of the deposits and other information, such as climate.

Middle Stone Age artefacts - including smaller and lighter flaked tools - have also been located and are between about 120 000 and 70 000 years old. It was probably within this period that fully modern *Homo sapiens sapiens* was emerging in Southern Africa.

Then, in the most recent silts - often on the surface - are scatters of Later Stone Age artefacts, sometimes with pieces of pottery. Intricately crafted tools such as 'scrapers' and 'backed pieces' testify to a degree of technical refinement which peaked during the Later Stone Age. The hunting and gathering lifestyle, with its emphasis on sharing and equality - known historically through the San or Bushmen - formed the basis of their economy.

This cultural sophistication was given artistic expression too, through rock art; in this case engravings, pecked into Nooitgedacht's glaciated andesite pavements, and found at hundreds of other sites in the area. Pupils are encouraged to make rubbings - one of the standard methods of recording them. Other activities while walking over the site include artefact identification.

Pottery was first introduced to the Northern Cape by Khoi pastoralists - who also brought sheep and cattle - probably more than 2 000 years ago. Some of the sites with pottery at Nooitgedacht are between circa 500 and 1 000 years old and indicate that herder groups - perhaps Korana - were then living with their flocks along the banks of the river. Other sites in the region were probably occupied by San hunter-gatherers.

From the middle of the 18th century various mixed groups and individuals, including Basters, Khoi refugees, missionaries, runaway slaves, traders and

renegades from the Cape moved up ahead of the encroaching colonial frontier. Some settled in communities, like the Griqua, who engaged in transfrontier trade. In the process they absorbed some of the local population: San, Korana and Tswana. Others, like Jan Bloem, a German, attached themselves to groups like the Korana, building up powerful commandos.

There are no known Iron Age sites at Nooitgedacht; but it is known that the Southern Tswana were living to the north of here from at least the 17th century. Following the *Difaqane* disruptions early in the 19th century, Mothibi, leader of the Batlhaping branch, moved south to establish his town on the Vaal, downstream from Barkly West - in an area then known as 'Bushman country'. His son, Jantjie Mothibi settled with a missionary at Dikgatlhong, near Delportshope, in 1839, and, until 1870, exercised authority - and control over diamond prospecting - in the area north of the river at least as far as Windsorton and including Klipdrift (later Barkly West).

Korana under Jan Bloem junior, however, were living on the north bank near Klipdrift at this time. Openly challenging Mothibi's authority, Bloem granted concessions to white traders and diamond diggers in exchange for ammunition. The result was the rush on Klipdrift (Shillington, 1985). Compounding problems, the same suddenly sought-after area became part of the 'Campbell Lands' which Arnot claimed as Griqua territory!

Insights

The archaeology of Nooitgedacht shows that the pre-colonial past in this region was by no means static and that the land question had a much greater time-depth than is historically apparent. As such, and with ethnography and early historical records, archaeology also provides insights to the subsequent struggles and land disputes of the late 19th century.

Ecological and geographic factors have had changing influences on human settlement patterns, relative to economy and technology, through time. Pupils learn that the river, for example, was a focus of activities over thousands of years. Its importance as a water resource would have increased significantly when Khoi herders with their domestic stock entered the region some 2 000 years ago. In modern times, however, it was another commodity - diamonds - which drew thousands of people to this stretch of the Vaal. Yet the major foci of settlement in the region have shifted again, with Kimberley having grown as a much greater mining centre and city, and Barkly West become little more than an agricultural town and hub of a relatively low key alluvial diamond digging enterprise.

Most importantly, participants in the field visits can see and handle the actual archaeological artefacts which are scattered on the ground at Nooitgedacht. From these and other remains, archaeologists, using the methods learnt about in the introductory talks, are able to build up and test theories and interpretations of past human life in the area.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The response of pupils and teachers alike has indicated that both the introductory talks and field visits are enjoyable and considered worthwhile. Some schools, both local and from other centres, have taken part in the programme more than once. Individuals, too, have returned to do more specialised school projects on, for example, rock engravings or the San. Often, moreover, schools include general evaluative remarks in their thankyou notes. The Thusong Project Discovery from Johannesburg plans a report-back and debate as part of its museum visit. From these sessions we have been able to gauge more specifically the strengths and weaknesses of the introductory talks in particular. A worksheet is now being designed, which will serve both to reinforce some of the points that we try to put across. and to enable us to judge the success of the programme.

There is a danger of 'intellectual indigestion'. Some pupils latch onto archaeological concepts more easily than others - probably through greater exposure to media with occasional references to archaeology or related fields. Black pupils are particularly impressed by some of the findings of archaeology, revealing as they do, aspects of their own unwritten past.

This is one of the answers to the question 'why bother?' Perhaps the most important reason for doing archaeology and having it interact with history - as it does in this museum context - is that it extends, enlightens and dignifies the history of all people. It is in this way, as Professor van der Merwe (1976) pointed out, that archaeology, while concerned with the past, serves also the needs of the future.

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