

TWO KHOEKHOE POTS DISCOVERED NEAR PRINCE ALBERT



Gareth Williams removing the Khoekhoe pots from the loose soil on Waterkop
(Photo: Gareth Williams)

Two pots of typical Khoekhoe (Hottentot) type, one intact and containing a dark glistening substance, the other broken into a number of large and small fire-blackened sherds, were discovered in late December by Gareth Williams of Prince Albert, eroding out of a natural drainage channel on the Waterkop smallholdings adjacent to the town. A day or two before Christmas, it had rained heavily in Prince Albert, and the run-off and rain between them had further exposed and washed the dust off the pots, a process probably on-going since the pots were first cached there by a Khoe man or woman many long years ago, in pre-Colonial times, judging from the available evidence.

The intact pot was found lying on its side and buried, with just its opening and part of the short neck protruding above the soil level and with the closed end facing upstream. Only a small amount of the paler surrounding sediment could therefore be washed into the pot, slightly mixing with the dark heavy contents. The protruding portion of the pot retains the original reddish colour of its outer surface, but any colour on the buried part of the pot has been leached

away by groundwater and damp soil. The second pot was found immediately adjacent to the intact pot, with most of the sherds, some of them quite small, lying nearby, showing that little disturbance has taken place since the pot was placed there. Any strong current of water or trampling by sheep would disperse small pottery fragments downslope, suggesting that the sherds have not been exposed for any length of time. Neither pot is decorated.

Gareth carefully removed the pots from the soft sandy soil, taking care not to spill or contaminate the contents of the intact pot. (see photo of Gareth extracting the pots). He and his friend, Willem Mathee, a student at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and formerly also of Sue Dean, brought the pots to me at Scholtzkloof for further information. I was thrilled to see the pots, because in 45 years of association with caves and cave deposits, archaeology, archaeologists, digs and museums I have never before experienced the discovery of an intact Khoe pot, let alone one with special contents.

Enquiries at the Iziko Museum in Cape Town revealed that despite being the oldest museum in South Africa, with a history of collection going back almost 200 years, the collection of Khoe pots numbers only 34, and of these, only 4 are recorded as being complete. The Prince Albert Khoe pot is very special!



Khoi pot, showing pointed base and asymmetric shoulder. Photo: Gareth Williams

Pot No 1

This is a medium-sized squat pot measuring 15.8cm from rim to bottom with the pointed base typical of Khoekhoe pottery. Only one of the Iziko Khoe pots is recorded as having a flat base. The pointed base meant that the pot would have had to be twisted into loose soil or into hot coals and ashes in order to stand upright. Left to its own devices, it simply tips to one side. It has one rounded and one pointed angular shoulder, a shape very unusual amongst Khoi pots, measuring 18.3cm across the widest part of the shoulder. (see image of pot). It does not have the reinforced pierced lugs - through which ropes or thongs were threaded and knotted, to facilitate hanging and transport – so typical of most Khoe pots. The body is of thin pottery, tempered with what appears to be finely crushed quartz grit to prevent cracking, and has been fired.

My geologist husband John Begg took one look at the glistening contents and said: “Magnetite”. A quick test with a small horseshoe-shaped magnet proved him correct: the dark mineral jumped spectacularly onto the magnet exactly as in the classic magnetic field demonstration using iron filings. (see image of magnetite clinging to magnet) Magnetite is a naturally occurring ore of iron (Fe_2O_4 , 72.4% iron) and long crystals of magnetite floated on water were used in olden times as compasses. The Khoi obviously did not use it in this way, but what then is a cache of magnetite doing here in Prince Albert? For what reason did the Khoe person or people cache it?

Early travellers have recorded the Khoekhoe custom of “besmearing themselves” with glistening mineral substances mixed with animal fat, and sprinkling and rubbing it into their

hair to make it shine. In particular, this practice referred to specularite, an even shinier form of iron, known by the Tswana as 'sebito'. Both substances are known to have been used as body decorants, as trade goods and for marking the body for ritual purposes. Wikar in 1778 noted the trading of this commodity by the Briqua up and down the Gariep with various groups of Khoi, who used to grind the rock to powder and then use it in this way. The practice was also independently noted by Somerville (in 1799-1802) and Burchell (in 1811). A study of the available literature revealed that magnetite has been found cached and buried in clay pots as well as in ostrich eggshell flasks from Namibia to the Western Cape, along the southern Cape coast and at several localities inland. Only 2 of the 34 Iziko pots are recorded as having had specularite contents, one of them having come from Fraserburg. Specularite and magnetite-filled pots have also been recorded from pre-Christian cairn-marked Khoi burial sites (where the bodies were typically buried in a crouching or squatting position, sitting up rather than prone), and where such pots form part of the grave goods. This attests to the ritual and social importance of the substance.

The intact Waterkop pot contained 1.4kg of magnetite, mixed with small amounts of the surrounding soil. Samples have been taken for further testing and analysis, and also of the find site soils because the source of the magnetite is still something of a mystery. It is more typical of igneous and metamorphic rocks, which are not present in the vicinity of Prince Albert, but granular magnetite may also be collected from river sands draining such areas. The use of pigment minerals such as ochre, specularite and magnetite for body decorant and rituals has an extremely long history; the latest South African Digging Stick journal (Dec 2012) describes perlemoen shell pigment palettes containing ochre and animal fat residues dating from around 100 000 years before present from Blombos Cave near Stillbay. The oldest known pigment mine (for specularite and haematite or red ochre – not for metal) in the world, can be dated to around 120 000 years. Pottery in the Western Cape, however, does not have such an extended history, being associated with the Khoekhoe people who reached the southern Cape coast only about 2000 years ago, and most dated pottery from archaeological sites is nowhere near as old as this. The Khoi pots probably date from a century or two immediately preceding local European settlement.

Pot No 2

Enough of the fragments survive to be able to say that this pot too had a pointed base and that it was of similar size. It, however, shows evidence of frequent use in a fire, perhaps for cooking or rendering fat, as it is very blackened on the outside to a level about half way up the pot, which is consistent with a pot standing in the hot coals and ash of a cooking fire. Perhaps there is enough carbon adhering to the outside to enable the pot to be dated – or at least to say when it was last used for cooking.

The pots will become part of the Fransie Pienaar Museum Collection.

The area surrounding the find site was inspected for other occupational debris but apart from a few ostrich eggshell fragments, there was little to be found either upstream or down, and no artefacts dating from the colonial period. On the lookout hilltop above the find locality there is an exposure of dolomite lenses with several engravings (see image) but these are quite apparently of widely differing ages and there is no way of knowing whether or not even the oldest of them are associated with or the same age as the 'pot people'.

The pots and engravings are part of a broader picture of pre-colonial occupation of Prince Albert and environs: there is a well-preserved Khoekhoe camp site with its associated stone

tools and manuports and landscape scars of a sheep-kraal on adjacent Wolwekraal as well as a second even older campsite used by San people who left behind some amazing microliths (extremely small finely-flaked stone tools, often less than 2cm long) a campsite probably also used by the Khoi more recently. These campsites can be seen on the guided walks offered by Sue and Richard Dean.

The pot discovery emphasises the need for proper Heritage Impact Assessments and Environmental Impact Assessments to be done before development takes place. Artefacts should not be disturbed or removed but reported to the nearest museum. Together with meteorites and all gravesites, they carry legal protection in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act. Spatial relationships between artefacts and between artefacts and the landscape on which they occur are extremely important and are very easily destroyed by careless disruption or by collecting, thus causing information extinction.

Congratulations Gareth on this very interesting find!

- Judy Maguire -