

# Iron Age heritage unearthed

Canteen  
Kopje  
reveals  
Iron Age  
secrets

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL work at Canteen Kopje near Barkly West has shed new light on Tswana heritage from the Late Iron Age.

Students from the Sol Plaatje University (SPU), together with students from the University of Toronto (Canada), are currently excavating a deposit of pottery, animal bones, and stone tools from the Late Iron Age at the site of Canteen Kopje.

The newly discovered Iron Age component of the site has shed new light on Tswana heritage in this critical locality which was also the site of early colonial alluvial diamond exploitation.

This excavation has been described as a new chapter in the rapid development of the SPU and will be the first archaeological field school for heritage

students from the Northern Cape.

This previously unknown component of the site was detected by archaeologists from the McGregor Museum in an area disturbed by sand mining.

“Iron Age occupation of this site was previously unknown and is very scarce this far south in the Northern Cape. This excavation is an important new phase in the scientific investigation of Canteen Kopje, which has been known for over 100 years as a major Earlier Stone Age site,” Dr David Morris, Head of Archaeology at the McGregor Museum, pointed out.

The Stone Age deposits are currently being researched by archaeologists from the University of Pennsylvania (United States) and the University of the Witwatersrand.

The evidence of Iron Age occupation was recently identified by Dr Morris with Koot Msawula

and Abenicia Henderson, also from the McGregor Museum.

The heritage programme at the SPU is taught by Garth Benneyworth and Nyebe Mohale and the archaeology course is being taught by Dr Alexandra Sumner. The University of Toronto’s participation is directed by Professor Michael Chazan and the research takes place under permit from the South African Heritage Resources Agency (Sahra).

All collections from the excavation will be housed at the McGregor Museum and studied in collaboration by the participating institutions.

Chazan pointed out that no one knew of this important component of Canteen Kopje despite years of investigation.

“This discovery demonstrates that archaeological sites always contain surprises and must be safeguarded for future scientific research. I am thrilled that my students from the University of Toronto have the opportunity to work together with their colleagues from the SPU in this field school.”

According to Morris, this region was fairly marginal for Iron Age agriculturists who first entered southern Africa almost 2 000 years ago but spread into these drier western parts only later.

“We know of their presence adjacent to the Vaal from historical records dating back to the early 19th century but known archaeological traces of their settlements hereabouts are rare. We expect this site to give us new insights into the pre-colonial history of Tswana people at what is now Barkly West, and their interaction with other groups in the last half millennium. It is an important site to have found,” Morris said.

There are currently 16 students from across the Northern Cape and North West provinces doing the Higher Certificate in Heritage Studies, which started this year at the SPU.

“This course provides a theoretical and practical grounding of knowledge and skills about the heritage sector. For example, their role in the archaeological excavation underway. This certificate enables a pathway for ongoing learning, as successful graduates can enter our BA degree programme, starting in 2016. We aim to produce students with a strong ability for independent thinking, and the skills developed would encourage work in diverse roles within national and provincial heritage management bodies or privately-managed heritage organisations. This could include roles from administration in heritage institutions such as museums, or assisting in archival work in a wide range of institutions including universities, public and private bodies, or working within the tourism industry,” Benneyworth stated.