

The case of the mysterious ‘button’ in South Africa

**How artefacts help date an archaeological site and answer
some questions about the ethnic identity of its earliest occupants**

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This paper is based on the present author’s Ph.D. thesis that analysed eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century skeletal remains from seven historical sites comprising three distinct indigenous South African communities, Griqua, Khoe and ‘Black’ South African peoples (figure1). The historical documents, both written and oral, are incorporated with the skeletal and archaeological data in order to answer the question “What life was like for these people during this time?”; in South African history, the Northern Frontier was a place where people from various cultural backgrounds lived in order to escape the oppression of Colonial society.

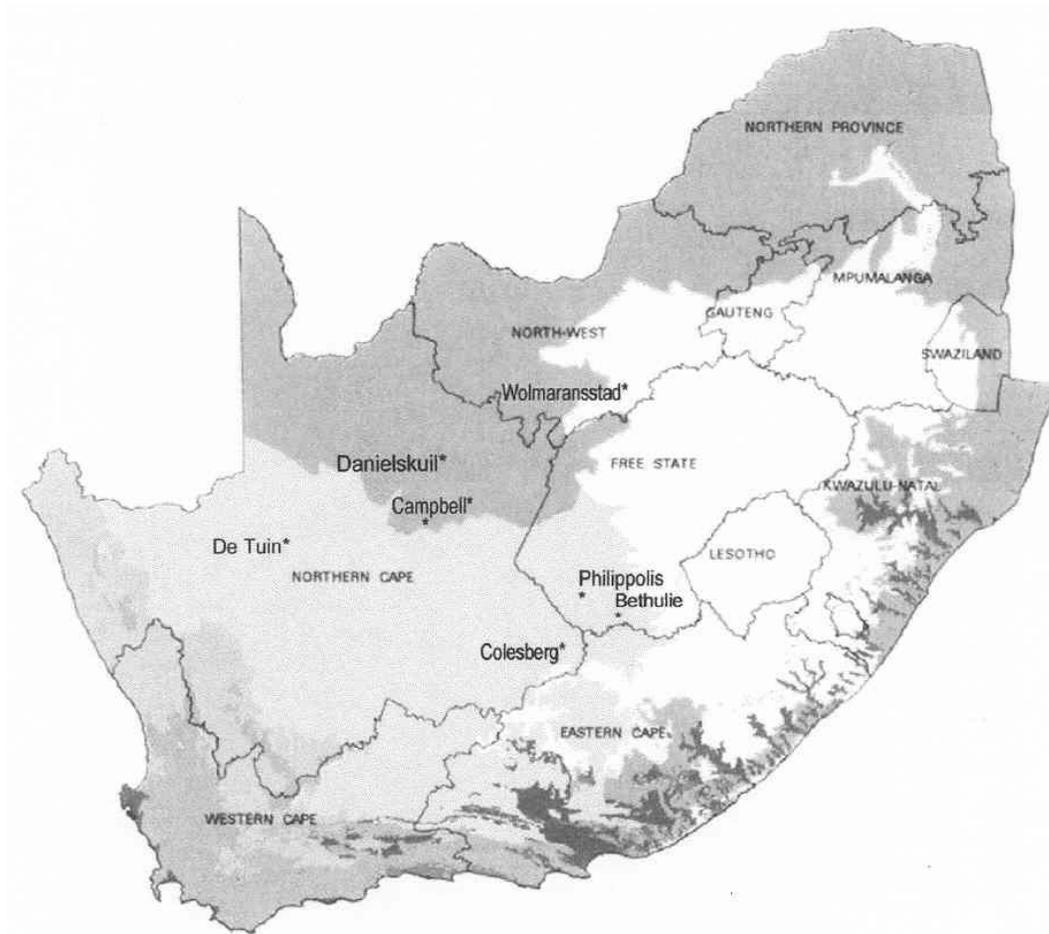


Figure 1: Map of South Africa with archaeological sites employed for this project (Developed from Low and Rebelo 1996).

Philippolis, occupied by Griqua peoples, contains cultural material which aided in dating the site. As well, the artefacts help in answering questions about the ethnic identities of the individuals who may have lived at the site or in the local area.

During the seventeenth century, sexual relations between Colonists and Khoekhoen women were common. The offspring of these unions would remain with the mothers and become members of the ‘Coloured’ community. In the eighteenth century the term Bastards (also spelled ‘Bastards’ and ‘Basters’), which means hybridity, was used to describe the children of Colonist and Khoekhoen parents. One Bastard group were partial to their Khoekhoen origins and conferred on themselves a shortened version of the ‘tribal’ name Chariguriqua (≠Karixurikwa in Khoe) that became Griqua (Nurse *et al.* 1985).

Philippolis is the oldest town in the Free State province (figure 2). A mission was founded in 1823 by ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1824 a school was instituted in Philippolis for the Griqua and in 1873 the first schoolhouse at Philippolis was built. The Annual Register for 1832 cites between 160 and 250 people frequenting Sunday worship and about 60-180 students attending school in Philippolis (Van de Sandt 1843).



Figure 2: Historic illustration of Philippolis (Potgieter 1973:520)

The raising of sheep for meat and wool was a very important industry in Philippolis. The wool was sold to the Colony and exported to Europe for great profit.

There are no data to confirm an absolute date but the Philippolis skeletal human remains are said to be from a “Griqua cemetery...on the edge of town” (Morris 1992:80). However, one artefact suggests a late 19th century date.

Some particularly interesting cultural material was present at this site: buttons, 1 very unique piece of jewellery with a Star of David design, pocket knife, leather from sole of shoe, piece of leather and metal bracelet (figure 3).



Figure 3: 'Star of David' jewellery (Photo by T. Peckmann)

The cultural remains discovered suggest a nineteenth century cemetery at Philippolis. Figure 3 illustrates a piece of jewellery with a very unique design, a raised Star of David with a 'flower' motif in the center of the star. The artefact was discovered along with other buttons however, since there was no button-back present it was difficult to assess its use; it was too large to be a cuff button and therefore was possibly a cloak button or a piece of jewellery. This artefact has been identified as made from black glass and probably Jewish in origin (personal communication Judy Stopke and Ronnie Wexler, 2001). During the 1800's Jews were involved in glass works in what is today Czechoslovakia and Germany; the area of Bavaria is historically known for fine glass making. Many Jews designed Star of David motifs for buttons and jewellery and wore them to identify each other, for pride of identity. The use of black glass reached a peak following the death of Queen Victoria's husband, Alfred, in 1861 as she wore black for the rest of her days and the fashion world followed suit. As well, the 'flower' motif, usually with eight points, in the center of the star represents the menorah. Even though the 'flower'

illustrated in figure 3 seems to have only six points it may have had eight points at one time as it is slightly damaged.

Although they were few in numbers, Jews were present in widely scattered places throughout the Free State during the nineteenth century. The earliest Jewish families, the Baumanns, Levisours and Ehrlichs, arrived in South Africa, from Germany and Russia, during the 1830's; the first account of Jews at Philippolis was in the year 1876 (Pencharz & Sowden 1955:325). Whether the 'owner' of the jewellery is of Jewish descent is not of primary importance for this project. The significance of the Star of David jewellery is that it gives some clues as to the date of this site, possibly late 1800's, and its earliest occupants.

The cultural material from Philippolis aided in understanding *when* the site was occupied but also by *whom*. The 18th, 19th, and 20th century northern frontier was occupied by a variety of cultures and ethnicities, many of whom were indigenous to Africa while others came from Europe to this land of opportunity to settle and start a new life. What occurred was the emergence of new communities with a way of life distinct from others around them. The data gathered in this project allow for a better understanding about the palaeodemography and life histories of the people living in the historic Northern Frontier of South Africa.

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