



# The organization of salt production in early first millennium CE South Africa



Alexander Antonites

University of Pretoria, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, Lynnwood Road, Hatfield, Pretoria, South Africa

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 4 March 2016

Revision received 1 August 2016

### Keywords:

Salt  
Salt making  
Production  
Specialization  
Early Iron Age  
Early Farming Communities  
Mzonjani  
Baleni  
Lowveld

## ABSTRACT

Salt production is an industry directly associated with the spread and emergence of agricultural communities of southern Africa's Early Iron Age. It is also one of the few economic activities from the period prior to 650 CE for which direct in situ production evidence exists. Research conducted at the Baleni salt production site in northeast South Africa focused on activities by communities associated with Mzonjani ceramics (c. 350–650 CE). Analysis of the context, concentration and intensity of production provide an understanding of how these communities accessed resources and mobilized labor. These parameters suggest that production was probably done by multiple small groups on a seasonal basis. Output was likely for own consumption rather than explicitly focused on trade. This research emphasizes the value of approaching resource extraction in non-state societies through distinct organizational principles often reserved for analysis of craft production in complex societies.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

## 1. Introduction

Around 2000 years ago, the first villages of Bantu-speaking communities appear in southern Africa. Over the subsequent c. 900 years – commonly referred to as the Early Iron Age (EIA) – farmers settled throughout the summer rainfall savannah areas of the region (Huffman, 2007). The combination of agriculture, animal husbandry and greater sedentism brought about very different political, economic and social organization compared to that of the autochthonous hunter-gatherers and mobile pastoralists (but see Hall, 1987a). Towards the end of this period, there is clear archaeological evidence for long-distance trade networks and increased social complexity in some locations. However, there is still a dearth of information on the earliest phases of the EIA – especially for the period prior to 650 CE. Hampered by preservation and small-scale, often short lived settlements, archaeologists are still trying to tease out some of the most fundamental aspects of their social and economic organization (cf. Mitchell and Whitelaw, 2005, p. 226). One of the few EIA industries for which there are direct in situ evidence is salt production. In this regard, the archaeological investigation of salt making not only presents a unique opportunity to study an EIA industry, but also to better understand the economic organization of southern Africa's earliest farming communities.

I will concentrate on the site known as Baleni (also referred to as Sautini), a salt making source linked to EIA farmers. Previously it had been suggested that salt produced at Baleni and other Lowveld sites could have been used to meet shortages in food supplies through regional exchange networks (Hall, 1987b). This implies a degree of producer specialization since “some communities were making a living by bartering with other villages” (Hall, 1987b, p. 65). Ethnographic evidence from later periods clearly show that communities could produce salt from a variety of sources including plants and salt rich soils, where available. The unequal distribution of sources meant that salt was widely traded in later periods (e.g. Bent, 1895, p. 309, 311; Burchell, 1824, p. 487; Quin, 1959, p. 236; Stayt, 1968, p. 48). It is therefore significant that historical accounts of precolonial trade in southern Africa specifically mention trade routes stopping at sites like Baleni in order to obtain salt for trade with salt-less communities further down the line (e.g. De Vaal, 1984, 1985; Harries, 1978, 1989). These accounts all date to the period after the establishment of Indian Ocean networks into the southern African interior in the second millennium CE. However, there is very little evidence for the extent and impact of long distance trade during the preceding EIA. Therefore, the argument that salt production combatted environmental constraints in the EIA cannot be assumed *a priori*.

Baleni is a brine spring located on the banks of the Klein Letaba River in South Africa's northern Lowveld region (Fig. 1) – the low lying, sub-tropical flats east of the Drakensberg Mountains in

E-mail address: [alexander.antonites@up.ac.za](mailto:alexander.antonites@up.ac.za)

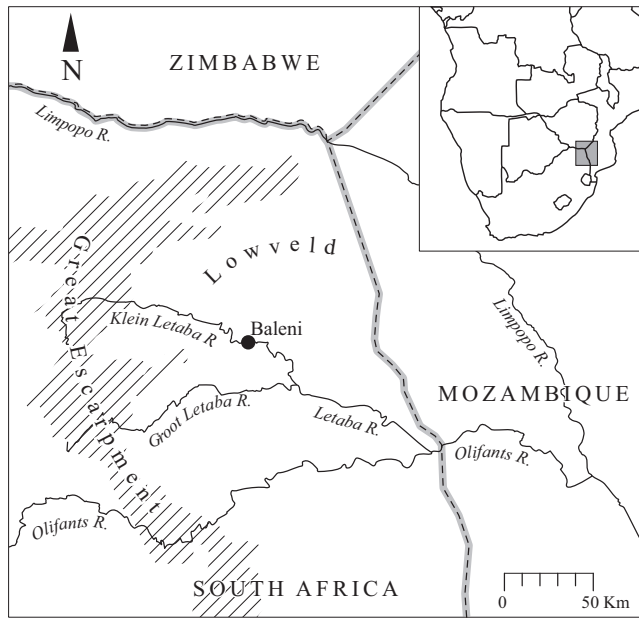


Fig. 1. Location of the Baleni salt making site in northeast South Africa.

northern South Africa. Archaeological research at Baleni, conducted between 2003 and 2005, revealed a wealth of information on the production activities of agriculturalists spanning the last 2000 years (Antonites, 2013). In the Lowveld, the earliest farming communities (c. 200–350 CE), are associated with the ceramic style known as Silver Leaves and are known from only a handful of sites (e.g. Klapwijk, 1974; Meyer, 1984). However, a few examples of their ceramics have been found at Baleni indicating that salt was being made even at this earliest period of agricultural expansion in the region. Over the course of the subsequent c. 300 years, descendant communities – associated with Mzonjani ceramics – become more numerous and spread over large parts of eastern South Africa (Maggs, 1980; Mason, 1981; Meyer, 1984; Whitelaw, 1996). These Mzonjani communities are also responsible for the bulk of EIA extraction activities at Baleni. This article will focus specifically on the organization of salt production by these communities (i.e. c. 350–650 CE). The aim is to arrive at a better understanding of the relationship between producers and consumers (i.e. whether they were from the same or potentially different groups), as well as the manner in which labor was mobilized during a period for which limited complementary evidence exist.

### 1.1. Early salt making at Baleni

The earliest phases of production at Baleni (Antonites, 2005) and other salt sources in the region (Evers, 1974, 1981) are associated exclusively with communities who made Kwale type ceramics. In the Lowveld, the Kwale ceramic tradition is represented by two phases: the initial Silver Leaves phase, (c. 340–450 CE) and the subsequent Mzonjani phase (c. 450–600 CE) (Klapwijk and Huffman, 1996). Silver Leaves settlements have been found on the Mozambican coast (Morais, 1988) and in low lying areas east of the Drakensberg Escarpment in South Africa (Meyer, 1984; Klapwijk and Huffman, 1996) and Zimbabwe (Huffman, 1978). Communities associated with Mzonjani assemblages are more numerous and settled in a much wider region within the savannah biome of South Africa (e.g. Huffman, 1998; Evers, 1974, 1979; Klapwijk and Huffman, 1996; Whitelaw, 1996; Whitelaw and

Moon, 1996). This increase in population probably explains why the majority of early extraction activities at Baleni are associated with Mzonjani ceramics, and less so with Silver Leaves.

The distinction between the two phases refers to a temporal division visible in ceramic assemblages and does not suggest any significant economic or social divergence between the two phases. Silver leaves (as well as the preceding Kwale phase in East Africa) have a higher proportion of bevels on vessel shapes as a distinct stylistic element. This is absent from Mzonjani, although other elements are retained (such as overall shape and decoration motifs). Therefore, the two phases are stylistically distinct and, given the occurrence of large fragments and high number of reconstructed vessels from Baleni (Antonites, 2005), their stylistic separation can be done with confidence. As a result, the absence of bevels from the Baleni assemblages under discussion indicates a clear association with fifth to early seventh century Mzonjani rather than the preceding (but related) ceramic phases such as Silver leaves and Kwale. This conclusion necessitates a thorough consideration of the radiocarbon dates from Baleni (Antonites, 2013). Three salt making areas were excavated around the Baleni spring, two of which were associated with Mzonjani ceramics. Excavation BAL01 represents a single salt making event. In contrast, BAL03 is a deeply stratified mound comprised of five distinct production events in which the earliest two, Events 4 and 5, are associated with Mzonjani ceramics. Two radiocarbon dates from BAL03 are associated with this assemblage. The first sample, taken from Event 4, dates to  $1700 \pm 60$  BP (Pta-9422). The second sample, taken close to bedrock in Event 5, dates to  $1990 \pm 50$  BP (Pta-9349). Both represent some of the earliest dates associated with farmers in southern Africa (see Antonites, 2013).

The dates from BAL03 are at the lower range of the EIA sequence in southern Africa and especially early for Mzonjani assemblages. Elsewhere, it was argued that these dates should be interpreted in light of early salt production events potentially being particularly prone to “old wood” problems (Antonites, 2013). Dry firewood would not have been depleted when the earliest production activities started at Baleni. This means that there were potentially stores of older wood readily available – a significant problem if one considers that the area is mostly covered by dense hardwood species such as mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*), red bushwillow (*Combretum apiculatum*) and leadwood (*Combretum imberbe*) that are insect resistant and preserve for long periods in the northern Lowveld’s semi-arid climate (Van Wyk, 1984). Since Pta-9349 is associated with the earliest phases of salt production at Baleni, the available stockpile of old wood around the spring would not have been depleted by successive salt making episodes, as would potentially have been the case in later years. Therefore, the  $1990 \pm 50$  BP (Pta-9349) date should not be taken at face value but must be interpreted in the context of regional chronology formation processes (cf. Schiffer, 1986). In this case, the clear association with Mzonjani ceramics (see below; Antonites, 2013), suggests that the cultural event that led to the formation of Event 5 more likely dates to the fifth century CE. The  $1700 \pm 60$  BP date from Event 4 (Pta-9422) falls within the lower estimates of the chronological distribution of Mzonjani ceramics – the type-site is dated  $1670 \pm 40$  BP (Pta-1980) – caution should once again be taken if one considers the potential influence of old wood on the date.

### 1.2. The archaeology of salt production in non-state societies

Comparative studies of salt production elsewhere in the world frequently discuss it as part of, or central to, emerging or established hierarchical political systems (e.g. Flad et al., 2005; Flad and Hruby, 2007; Parsons, 2001; Rathje, 1972). This is far removed from both the social and political landscape of first millennium CE

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1034840>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1034840>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)