

Ceramics, Ethnohistory, and Ethnography: Locating Meaning in Southern African Iron Age Ceramic Assemblages

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Abstract For ceramics to be relevant in the Southern African Iron Age, archaeologists must broaden their theoretical base to include social and other contexts when interpreting material culture items such as pottery. Pottery remains critical in understanding cultural dynamics in the region for the past two millennia, but current usage is narrow in scope. Using ethnohistorical data and archaeological examples from South Africa and Zimbabwe, we argue that pottery provides valuable information on the region's Iron Age, if archaeologists address the social meaning of ceramic assemblages. Ceramic production among rural communities provides the basis on which a wide range of social issues are discussed and used to critique pottery recovered from archaeology. Ethnography suggests that ceramic assemblages are context specific, and archaeologists are cautioned against making generic statements on the basis of similarities of vessel shape and decoration motif.

Résumé Pour faire en sorte que la céramique contribue aux études de l'Âge du Fer en Afrique australe, l'interprétation archéologique doit prendre meilleure mesure des différents contextes dans lesquels évolue la poterie. La poterie joue un rôle critique dans la compréhension des dynamiques culturelles de la région au cours des deux derniers millénaires, mais elle demeure limitée dans son usage. Sur la base de données ethnohistoriques et d'exemples archéologiques tirés d'Afrique du Sud et du Zimbabwe, nous soutenons que la poterie peut fournir des informations précieuses sur l'Âge de Fer régional si les archéologues s'attachent à examiner la signification sociale des assemblages céramiques. La production potière dans les communautés rurales nous permet de traiter un large éventail de questions sociales et de formuler une critique de la poterie issue de

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