

Unbuttoning the past: buttons found at Welkomskraal in the Eastern Cape

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Introduction

Most textiles are made of organic material and for this reason they do not preserve well. At most excavations only fragments of textiles are found. To understand what people wore in the past it is therefore necessary to examine those parts of the garment that do survive. Fasteners, for example buckles, buttons and hooks and eyes, are the most frequently recovered. They are the direct reflection of the accessories or garments worn by the former site residents. Of these, buttons are the most common. There are thirteen buttons among the material culture found at Welkomskraal. Although this is a small number they can tell us something about the possible domestic economy and personal adornment of the residents of Welkomskraal from the 1880s to 1920s. Buttons, that were too damaged or fragmented are not included in this study, nor are shirt studs, solitaires or hooks and eyes.

Artefact no.	Diameter (mm)	Attachment	Condition	Description	Possible Clothing	Collection	Indicators
Metal							
Corrosion: rust with iron; bronze disease with brass and copper alloys							
WKK1/3764	16mm	Sew-through	Whole	"OUR OWN MAKE" stamped on face Four sew holes, domed shape, moulded	Coat, jacket or trousers	Layer 3	
WKK1/2026	18mm	Sew-through	Whole, covered in rust		Coat, jacket or trousers	Surface	
WKK1/1074	16mm	Sew-through	Whole, bronze disease visible	"SUSPENDER" stamped on face	Coat, jacket or trousers	Surface	
WKK3/1742	18mm	Shanked	Whole, shank missing, corroded		Coat, jacket or trousers	Layer 2	
WKK2/1215	16mm	Sew-through	Whole, bronze disease visible	Two sew holes	Coat, jacket or trousers	Layer 3	
WKK2/1096	8mm		Whole	Engraved four-square foliate design	Shirts or waistcoat	Surface	
WKK3/1308		Chain	Broken chain, missing disk	Sleeve button (cufflink)	Shirt or jacket	Surface	
Glass							
Cool to the touch, moulded, high-pitched ring, faceted							
WKK3/1535	23mm	Self-shanked	Whole	Clear. Flower design on face with hairline cracks on back Black. Flower design on face, moulded	Coat, jacket or decorative	Surface	
WKK1/2027	11mm	Self-shanked	Broken shank		Shirt, waistcoat, decorative	Surface	
WKK2/1395		Shanked	Fragment, shank missing	Moulded	Coat or jacket	Surface	
Vulcanite							
Moulded, brown markings on paper, brown powder when scratched, fades to brown							
WKK1/3036	14mm	Self-shanked	Whole	Black. Flower design on face	Shirt, waistcoat, decorative	Layer 6	
Mother-of-Pearl							
Opalescent colour, striations (little ridges or lines)							
WKK1/1071(2)	13mm	Shanked	Whole, shank missing	Single hole	Shirt	Surface	
WKK3/1880	13mm	Shanked	Fragment	Single hole	Shirt	Layer 2	



Mother-of-pearl buttons
In general the term mother-of-pearl is used to describe all buttons made of shell. These buttons were initially handmade but from the mid nineteenth century were mechanically mass-produced. The earliest mother-of-pearl button was the single holed pin-shank type. The most common form is the two- or four-holed sew-through types. Mother-of-pearl buttons with a diameter of 10-12mm were normally used as closures for shirts, while smaller ones were used for underwear and pillowcases. (Lindbergh, 1999)



Metal buttons

More buttons have been made of metal than of any other substance, the majority being wholly or partly of brass. Metal buttons are made by casting, i.e. pouring molten metal into prepared moulds, or by cutting the buttons from a sheet of metal. (Peacock, 2008) Two- or four-holed metal buttons are considered plain buttons and were used to fasten shirts and trousers. The majority of these buttons are made from a single sheet of copper alloy and often bear generic inscriptions such as "our own make" or "suspender". These buttons can be related to ordinary work wear. (Lindbergh, 1999)



Glass buttons

Glass buttons first appeared in the 1500s but only became popular during the 19th century. After the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861, Queen Victoria wore only black, including black buttons. Queen Victoria's black buttons were made of jet, but these were very expensive. Black glass became a popular, less expensive substitute for jet. Glass buttons are difficult to date because popular styles and decorations (called stock patterns) were sometimes produced over long periods of time. (Vocelle, 2008) Buttons made wholly of glass and with a self-shank date from the twentieth century.



Vulcanite buttons

Vulcanite was discovered in 1839 by Charles Goodyear. Vulcanite is a hard black insulating material made by the vulcanization of rubber with a high proportion of sulphur. Vulcanite was especially popular during the Victorian era (1846-1901) because of its resemblance to the dark coloured heartwood, ebonite. A variety of items, such as combs, buttons, vesta cases, jewellery, fountain pens, pipe stems and musical instruments, were made out of vulcanite. Vulcanite pieces were almost always moulded.

Conclusion

The saying "clothes maketh the man" implies that a man's social status is defined by what he wears. (Lindberg, 1999) Most of the buttons recovered at Welkomskraal are cheap functional examples and exhibit characteristics of a standard working class wardrobe, with the emphasis on buttons used to fasten work shirts, trousers and jackets. The low quantity of buttons according to Grover (2002) could also be an indication of basic more easily maintainable clothing. Although the two small, black, decorative buttons could be linked to women's dress, this assumption is hampered by the fact that small "fancy" buttons, also referred to as "Fancy Vest" buttons, were popular on men's vests or waistcoats in the late nineteenth century. Most of the buttons found do not match with any of the others. In all likelihood they were either lost or thrown away, ending up in one of the dump sites at Welkomskraal. All the buttons except for one glass button (WKK 3/1535) adhere to the site date of 1880-1920. According to Peacock (2008) the mass production of buttons, which started at the end of the nineteenth century, makes it almost impossible to distinguish a button made in 1880 from a similar one that was made in 1912. For this reason a more accurate dating of these buttons would only be possible with advanced dating techniques.

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