At the invitation of the Department of Nature Conservation, a preliminary excavation was carried out at a shell midden complex at Wortel near Walvis Bay during January, 1976. The site will be inundated upon completion of a salt evaporation pan. Although there is good reason to believe that cultural material has been previously collected from these middens and that any sampling of this material will thus be biased, it was nevertheless felt that the evidence of economic activities and exploitation patterns to be gained from the faunal analyses justified work on the site.

The site is situated in the delta of the Kuiseb River at the western edge of the dunes that have blocked the course of the river. A scatter of shell, bone and other material lies on a number of small dunes as well as on the intervening fluvial sediments. The sedimentary history of the area represents a complex interaction between dune movement across the delta and their truncation and burial by flood silts. This could have resulted in older sites being buried or washed away. The present midden complex could post date the last episode of fluvial deposition. However, a stream channel just to the west of the site could indicate continuing intermittent stream activity restricted to downcutting rather than flooding and deposition. This change in volume of the discharging river could have resulted from the river shifting its main channel elsewhere. Further work is planned to test this hypothesis.

The cultural material recovered includes ostrich eggshell beads and pendants, bone points, potsherds, quartzite flakes, quartz pebbles used as rubbers and grindstones or palettes of schist. In addition, a number of Marginella capensis shells appear to have been artificially bored. The mammal fauna consists of Arctocephalus pusillus, small medium bovids, large medium bovids and a Cetacean (R. Klein pers comm). The shell sample consists of Lutraria lutraria, Perna perna, Choromytilus meridionalis, Nassarius plicatellus, Bullia laevisima, Putella argenvillei, Thais haemastoma, Hinnites sp, Marginella capensis and Donax serra, (B. Kensley pers comm). Also recovered were fish and bird remains.

The radiocarbon dates are as follows:

Pta—1645 Wortel KM2 400±50 years B.P.
Pta—1651 Wortel KM3 260±50 years B.P.

According to the calibration curve, the most probable date for KM2 is AD 1460 and for KM3 AD 1635. The samples were taken from two separate middens and thus indicates the time period over which the site was utilised. The earliest known inhabitants of the Walvis Bay area were Topnaars and Damara (Alexander 1838; Galton 1853). It is thus possible that the middens at Wortel and at other places along the coast (Sandelowsky & Pendleton 1970) can be attributed to one or both of these people.
Plate 1. View of midden KM2 from the stream channel to its west. Notice how the midden has been truncated by the channel revealing the layered silts of the salt flats.

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