SOUTH AFRICA BEFORE VAN RIEBEECK

some results of recent archaeological research

by Tim Maggs

The development of archaeology and related studies has been particularly rapid in South Africa since about 1965. Many more local institutions are now concerned with archaeology and an international awareness of the potential has attracted research workers from overseas. Much of the work is still in progress or so recent that it has not yet been published in any detail. But already the results are so significant that they drastically alter our previous views on the prehistory of South Africa. Several of the stages of Stone Age technological development are now placed much earlier in time. And we can begin to see changing patterns of interaction between man and his environment.

Most of the new information on Stone Age hunter-gatherers comes from excavations on or near the Cape Coast although archaeologists have also been working in other areas such as Lesotho and southern S.W.A./Namibia. The deep deposits in some of the coastal caves extend back thousands of years to the period before 10 000 years ago when sea level was much lower due to the enormous spread of ice caps during the last glaciation or 'Ice Age.' Although South Africa was not covered with ice like northern Europe and Canada the climate was considerably cooler. The coastline was far out to sea from its present position. Caves which are today on the coast in places like Plettenberg Bay, Die Kelders and Elands Bay were far inland, as much as 80 km, and the people who used them hunted only land animals. They were too distant from the shore to use its rich resources of shellfish, fish, seals and marine birds until the sea began to return to its present position as world temperature warmed up.

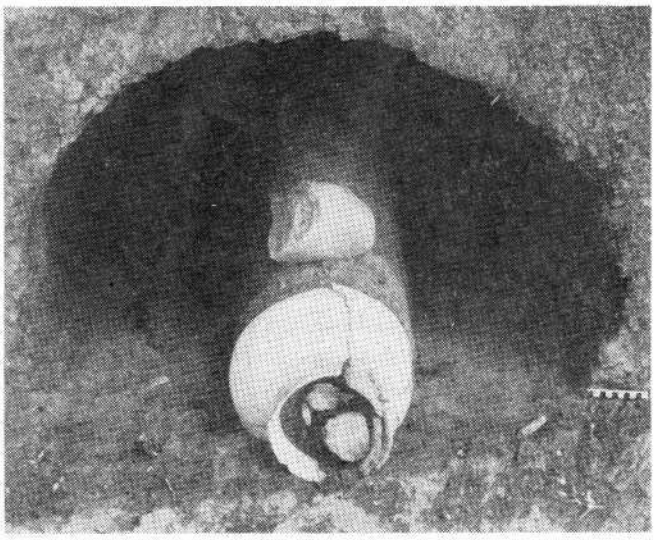
Man was evidently a proficient hunter, for the bones of both large and small animals were left behind in these caves. He may even have been the cause of the extinction of several large animals by over hunting them. A large, long-horned buffalo, **Pelorovis,** a giant zebra, **Equus capensis** and a large hartebeest-like antelope apparently became extinct around 12-15 000 years ago, just as in Europe the mammoth and woolly rhinoceros were apparently wiped out by man.

Even older than this are the earliest known examples of art in Africa. Several slabs of rock with pictures of animals on them were excavated from layers dated to between 25 000 and 27 000 years ago in the Apollo II cave in southern S.W.A./Namibia. They are amongst the oldest art in the world and throw doubt on the long-held belief that art is Euro-Asian in origin.

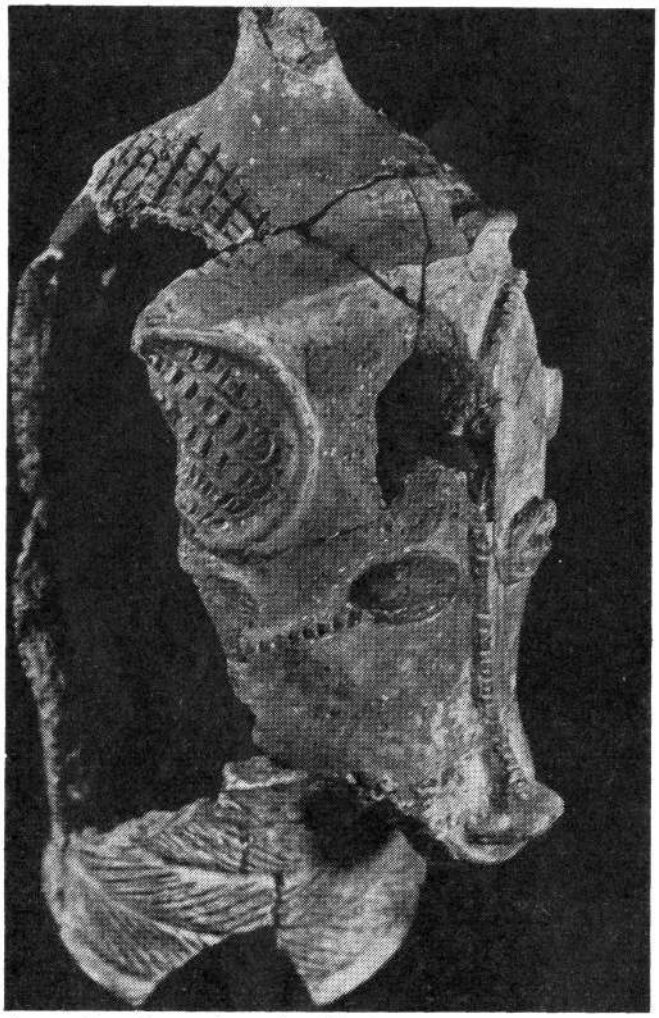
South Africa together with East Africa has produced evidence of man's biological origins which indicate that this continent was the cradle of mankind and of his culture. The more than two million years of his cultural and biological evolution are well recorded in the multitude of archaeological sites in this country. From them it is clear that this was no cultural backwater, but part of the mainstream of man's development. It was only with the domestication of animals and plants – the Neolithic revolution of the Mediterranean and adjacent regions – that development in some parts of the world moved rapidly ahead.

While southern Africa continued to be occupied by hunter-gatherers, from about 8 000 years ago regions like the Middle East progressed to settled villages, then urban life with specialized economic activities. This was only possible with the increased food supply resulting from the controlled production of animal and vegetable foods. Some of the most significant recent discoveries in South Africa show that both communities with livestock and communities living a settled village life based on agriculture as well as livestock were established in South Africa far earlier than was previously thought.

About 2 000 years ago flocks of sheep were already being herded in the southern and western Cape Province as well as S.W.A./Namibia. Their owners were apparently Khoisan (Bush-Hottentot) peoples who made a distinctive type of pottery with small handles or lugs and pointed bases. They lived sometimes in caves, sometimes in the open where they probably built small, flimsy huts. Apart from their sheep, pottery and perhaps a few cattle and dogs, they lived a life very much like their predecessors for they continued to hunt, collect wild vegetable food as well as to exploit the rich sea harvest of the Cape coast, seals, fish, birds, crayfish and especially shellfish. It is still uncertain as to how the change took place but it seems that the previous Stone Age hunter-gatherers were not displaced by a new population but that at least some of them adopted these new ideas. Others apparently remained as hunter-gatherers, for when the first white explorers arrived, some 1 500 years later,



Half of a typical pit after excavation. The pot with its base deliberately broken off, was carefully buried in the upper part of the pit more than 1 000 years ago. From the Tugela River near Weenen.



A ceramic sculpture of an animal-like face. One of several from Lydenburg in the Eastern Transvaal dated to around 500 AD.

some lived a pastoral life (the Hottentots) while others (the Bushmen) did not have sheep or cattle and lived in the more mountainous or arid interior parts of the Cape Province.

The origins of the Stone Age livestock and pottery of southern Africa are still unknown. However, recent discoveries in the highlands of Kenya and northern Tanzania show that people were already making pottery and stone bowls as well as herding livestock here as long ago as 2 000 to 3 000 BC. These items could have reached South Africa by an actual movement of people or by a gradual spread from one group of people to another as their advantages were appreciated.

An altogether more drastic change took place over much of eastern South Africa at about 300 AD or a little earlier. This was part of a very widespread phenomenon which affected most of Africa from the Equator southwards in the centuries just before and after the beginning of the Christian Era. For the first time we find evidence of settled village life based on agriculture as well as livestock, and for the first time we find metal working. This phenomenon is known as the Early Iron Age.

Archaeological research in Rhodesia, Zambia and northwards to Kenya in the 1950's and 1960's began to give us a picture of the Early Iron Age. The sites were recognised firstly by their distinct and richly decorated pottery which shows remarkable similarity over great distances in spite of detailed local variations. But it was not until 1973 that archaeologists finally discovered evidence that Early Iron Age peoples had settled widely in South Africa. In the last four years much work has been done, and although most of it has not yet been published a coherent picture of the Early Iron Age is beginning to emerge.

Villages were often quite large, sometimes 10 or more hectares in extent, and they were usually built on deep soils in valley bottoms. Few signs of structures above ground survive but the floors of round huts have been found at some sites. All that remains is the impressions of poles and thatch in pieces of mud plaster hardened by fire when the hut burnt down. The villagers owned herds of cattle and sheep or goats which must have been kraaled at night. So far no traces of kraals have been found but this is not surprising as they were probably made of pole fences which would long since have rotted away.

The choice of deep soils for their village sites was no doubt determined by the desire to be close to their fields. But there is another reason, for a peculiarity of many Early Iron Age villages is the number of pits that were dug one or two metres deep into the relatively soft soil. These often contain domestic rubbish – broken pottery, grindstones, animal bones, various implements, shell beads and ash. Charcoal from such pits can be accurately dated by the radiocarbon method. To an extent we can regard these pits as rubbish dumps. However, quite frequently they also contain an almost complete pot, but with its base deliberately broken off. This has been reported from northern Zambia to Natal, showing how widespread the practice is, although we still do not know the reason for it.

Most of the material we find on Early Iron Age sites has a utilitarian explanation but at a few sites fragments of ceramic sculpture show that a high standard of art was achieved. The only examples that are nearly complete come from Lydenburg in the Eastern Transvaal. These are heads of humans and an animal modelled in clay, using the form of an upside down pot. Although they form an as yet unique group of sculptures they are certainly African in character. There is even some resemblance between them and the earliest known African Negro art, that of Nok is northern Nigeria, which also consists of ceramic heads of humans and animals. The rarity of Early Iron Age sculpture, and indeed its virtual absence from central and eastern Africa, could be explained if the usual materials used were wood or unfired clay. These would rapidly weather away leaving no archaeological traces.

Who were these Early Iron Age people? It is possible but very unlikely that a complex and radically new way of life could have spread to the existing Stone Age, Khoisan peoples of southern Africa. But if we look at the historic distribution of Bantu-speaking peoples we find that the distribution of the Early Iron Age coincides very closely indeed. Linguists argue that the Bantu-speaking people originated in central or more likely West Africa (the Niger-Benue area). Because of the relative similarity of the different languages in the Bantu family, these people are thought to have spread fairly rapidly to their present areas. This again fits in well with the archaeological evidence for there are numerous radiocarbon dates which indicate that the Early Iron Age spread to areas as far apart as Kenya and Natal in a matter of two or three hundred years. Furthermore, the human skeletons from burials at Early Iron Age sites prove to be of Negro physical type, similar to the present Bantu-speaking people.

Archaeologists are generally agreed that the Early Iron Age, like its later developments from about 1 000 AD down to historic times, is the culture of Bantu-speaking peoples.

South of the equator only these people have ever been known to live in settled villages, with an economy based on hoe cultivation of African crops such as millet, sorghum and cowpeas, as well as owning herds of cattle and small stock. Only these people smelted iron and copper to make their characteristic spears and hoes as well as other implements and ornaments.

Until recently some historians still believed that the Bantu-speaking peoples reached South Africa as late as 1 600 AD. Current work on the Early Iron Age has completely changed this picture. Dozens of sites are now known from the northern, central and eastern Transvaal, over 100 from Natal and several from the Transkei and Ciskei coast as far south as the Chalumna River near East London. As they spread southwards into the more temperate climate of South Africa the Early Iron Age people seem to have avoided the high altitude grass country as well as the arid west. They concentrated on the savanna bushveld areas which became narrower through Natal into the eastern Cape. They also lived along the coast and made good use of the rich beds of mussels and other shellfish. The savanna areas, near the coast and up the major rivers provided sweet grass for year round grazing, timber for building and for fuel. But it is probable that good soils and reasonable rainfall for crops was a major determining factor to where they lived.

South and West of the area around East London the amount of rain falling in the summer months decreases abruptly. Iron Age crops all depend on summer rainfall and cannot be grown without irrigation where it is inadequate. Irrigation was unknown to these people. Present evidence therefore indicates that the Early Iron Age had spread as far south as the extent of reliable summer rainfall (round about East London) before 1 000 AD. The assumption that Bantu-speaking peoples only reached this area in the eighteenth century when the white settlers first met them is clearly incorrect. The whole historical question of the Eastern Cape 'frontier' therefore needs to be reviewed in the light of the new evidence that Iron Age people were established here some thousand years before white settlement. □

Map showing approximately the known limits of Early Iron Age settlement, before 1 000 AD. Question marks show areas where research has not yet been carried out.