

WHO LIVED IN THE STELLENBOSCH WINELANDS BEFORE 1652?

This short essay describes what is currently known about the archaeology and history of the Stone Age people who lived in the Winelands and the Western Cape before European colonisation.

When and where did the human story begin?

There is abundant archaeological evidence from stone tools, and a few human remains, that Stone Age hunter-gatherer people lived in the Western Cape for about a million years, but there is no evidence yet in this region for the earliest stone tools and hominin remains that date to at least 3 million years ago in the Cradle of Humankind in Gauteng and North-West.

What do we mean by the Stone Age?

The Stone Age was the time when most of the tools that hunter-gatherer people used were made by striking one stone against another so that sharp edges were created. Many fine-grained rocks will produce edges that are sharper than a metal knife, but stone becomes blunt much more quickly than metal. People became very skilled at making stone tools, also called artefacts, and over hundreds of thousands of years Stone Age technology and lifestyle in southern Africa underwent several major changes. In the beginning, the tools were made by removing flakes from a core to create a sharp cutting edge around the core. Later, they used the flakes and blades that came from the core and hafted them with gum or glue to wooden shafts. This led to a gradual diminution in the size of stone tools that can be seen throughout the world. Archaeologists focus on stone tools as the primary source of evidence for the presence of people in the landscape in the past because they are almost indestructible and therefore are often all that is left behind after bones, wood, plant remains and even shells have disintegrated.

During most of the Stone Age period in South Africa people practised a hunter-gatherer economy and lifestyle, some changing to herding within the last 2000 years but continuing with hunting of game animals, fishing, and gathering of plant foods and marine resources. The carrying capacity for people living in the fynbos and relying on plant foods was probably limited and as a result the population density may never have been very high although it was clearly sustainable. Shellfish, fish and seals provided staple foods along the coast, and inland the meat from hunting mainly small game was supplemented with small animals such as tortoises, hares, dassies and birds, as well as insects. Archaeological evidence shows that plants with underground storage organs like corms and bulbs of watsonias, uintjies, babiana and others provided staple carbohydrates, supplemented by above-ground foods like seeds, berries and fruits.

After the introduction of domesticated animals, milk from both sheep and cows became a staple food for the herders but animals were slaughtered only for ritual purposes and special occasions. Kolb, who reported on his experience with the Khoe between 1705 and 1713, stated that the Khoe sometimes drank fresh milk out of the milking container immediately after milking, in order to quench their thirst. He mentioned also that both fresh cow's and sheep's milk was drunk, and that men enjoyed drinking water or cow's milk with their food (Lombard & Parsons 2015). In fact, and notwithstanding several records to the contrary, some reporters suggest that "milk is never drunk while it is sweet" (e.g., Paterson 1790: 20), and that soon after milking, it was mixed with curdled milk and kept in a leather sack. Sparrman (1785: 239) also told of how the Khoe welcomed his

company by inviting them to drink sour “sack-milk”, which tasted like syllabub. On this occasion, their hosts informed them that sweet milk was “unwholesome”, and thus always mixed with sour milk in the milk sack. They were assured, however, that this was done daily to supply them with ‘fresh’ sour milk without having to bother with cleaning the bag in which it was kept (Lombard & Parsons 2015).

Changes through time in southern Africa

The following stages in tool-making, lifestyle and economy took place over the last million years.

- The Earlier Stone Age (ESA) lasted from before 1.3 million to about 300,000 years ago and is characterised by fairly large core stone tools, on average about the size of a human hand.
- During the Middle Stone Age (MSA), about 300,000 to 40,000 years ago, the average size of stone flakes and blades was seldom larger than a middle finger.
- In the Later Stone Age (LSA), about 40,000 to 300 years ago, some stone tools were about the size of a thumbnail and few were larger than the palm of a human hand. The people who made them are generally believed to have been the ancestors of the indigenous San (Bushmen).
- About two thousand years ago, domesticated sheep, and later cattle and goats, were introduced from north-eastern Africa through migration and exchange and some indigenous people became herders, made pottery to store livestock products, and continued to make stone tools. These herders were ancestors of the Khoekhoen (previously spelled Khoikhoi) who met with European sailors from 1488, and interacted with European settlers from 1652.
- By about 300 AD, important technological and economic changes were introduced into what is today South Africa by migrant Iron Age (Bantu-speaking) farmers from central and eastern Africa who mined and smelted metal for many tools, kept livestock, and planted crops like sorghum and millet in the northern and eastern part of the country. They did not settle in the Western Cape until after European colonisation because their crops needed summer rainfall and the climate in the Western Cape had mostly winter rain.
- An even greater change took place from the south and west less than four hundred years ago when people of European descent came by sea to farm, build permanent structures, manufacture a wide variety of products and make fundamental changes to the landscape.

The Earlier Stone Age

Evidence comes from thousands of stone tools that have been found on the banks of rivers or near to water sources throughout South Africa, but seldom in caves and rock shelters. Over tens of millions of years, the natural water erosion process in river beds created smoothed and rounded cobbles of an ideal size for the stone tools that we now call handaxes and cleavers. Early humans from as far afield as England, France, Israel, India, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa made these tools to the same pattern for nearly a million years. Handaxes were multi-purpose cutting tools used for skinning and cutting up meat, breaking bones to remove the marrow, digging up roots, wood-working and other tasks. Cleavers were used for similar purposes but were designed with a straight cutting edge in the shape of a metal axe we might use for chopping wood today. The small number of human remains associated with handaxes, from the west coast near Langebaan, confirm that

Earlier Stone Age (ESA) people were not yet of our species, *Homo sapiens*, and their brain configuration probably limited their ability to innovate.

Stellenbosch was one of the first places in South Africa where Earlier Stone Age tools, also known as Acheulian after the site of St Acheul in France, were described in print. Louis Péringuey wrote in his report on *The Stone Ages of South Africa* in 1911: “At the foot of a steep hill called Papegaaiberg runs a small rivulet – a tributary of the Eerste River. The spur of the hill abuts on that rivulet and is intersected on one side by a cart road and by the railway cutting on the other. The space thus left has been used for a good many years as a brick field from which a thickness of 20 feet of material or more has been removed. I found there, in the vertical wall ... two superposed layers of fractured, water worn boulders, spalls, nuclei, etc. They had been deposited on the granite foundation ... which terminates abruptly on the bank of the Eerste River.” Péringuey named the stone tools that he found the ‘Stellenbosch Culture’.

A century of research by archaeologists has confirmed Péringuey’s observation that the stone implements found around Stellenbosch are indeed very old and are included in the Earlier Stone Age (called the Lower Palaeolithic in Europe) which covers the time between about 1.3 million and 300,000 years ago in southern Africa. Handaxes and cleavers are found in many vineyards in the valleys of the Eerste, Berg, Breede and Olifants Rivers in the south-western Cape. Montagu Cave is remarkable for the fact that it is one of only 6 cave sites in southern Africa with Earlier Stone Age tools.

Louis Albert Péringuey was born in Bordeaux, France, on 9 October 1855. He qualified as an entomologist specialising in Coleoptera (beetles) and came to Cape Town as a consultant to investigate diseases in South African vineyards. His interest in entomology and archaeology led him to become Director of the South African Museum (now Iziko) in Cape Town in 1906 and he worked there until his sudden death on 2 February 1924. He wrote many scientific papers describing new insect taxa and Stone Age sites in South Africa. His collections are divided between the Iziko South African Museum, Transvaal Museum, Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Genova and the collections of the German Entomological Institute.

In acknowledgement of Péringuey’s work, the site at Bosman’s Crossing near the Eerste River was declared a National Monument in 1961. When the National Heritage Resources Act replaced the National Monuments Act in 2000, all former national monuments became Provincial Heritage Sites. The Stellenbosch Archaeological Reserve is now a Provincial Heritage Site. The original bronze plaque erected by the former National Monuments Council was stolen in the early 2000s but the stone plinth remains as a reminder of the significance of the site.

The Middle Stone Age

This time period is not well represented in the Winelands, partly because there are few large rock shelters that would have been suitable for habitation, and partly because the Middle Stone Age (MSA) saw a change in the way that people used the landscape, preferring to live in large rock shelters, often on the coast where they collected shellfish and other seafood, and with less emphasis on proximity to water. A cave in the Wemmershoek mountains has MSA tools on the surface and they have also been reported at Solms-Delta, Franschhoek and Klapmuts (Malan 2017).

Very few diagnostic human remains have been found with MSA in the Western Cape apart from isolated teeth and some small bones, because people were not burying their dead at that time. However, parts of skulls, a mandible, foot bones, and a clavicle have been found in MSA deposits at Klasies River on the Eastern Cape coast, and inland at Border Cave in KwaZulu-Natal. These remains confirm that by at least 115,000 years ago MSA people living on the southern edge of the African continent were anatomically modern and their physical features were well within the range of variation of living *Homo sapiens*.

It is in MSA deposits dating between about 60,000 and 80,000 years ago, that some remarkable discoveries have been made in caves and rock shelters on the Western Cape coast at Blombos near Still Bay, and at Diepkloof near Elands Bay on the west coast. They provide the earliest evidence in the world that people at that time were engraving and drawing patterns on ochre and stone, engraving patterns on ostrich eggshell, and decorating themselves with beads and probably ochre as well. The earliest dated rock paintings in Africa (about 28,000-30,000 years) were associated with MSA artefacts at Apollo 11 cave in southern Namibia. They are on small pieces of rock that are geologically distinct from the walls of the cave so they are different in that sense from the paintings on cave walls and ceilings that are considered to have been made during the LSA.

Another 'first' is evidence that stone tools were hafted onto shafts to make arrows and spears during this phase of the MSA. Caves and rock shelters that were lived in regularly during the MSA accumulated more evidence about the diet of the people who lived there than is possible at most ESA sites. People were hunting large animals like eland and buffalo as well as smaller antelope. Where it has been possible to recover plant remains, there is evidence that fruits and bulbs were gathered and eaten too, and that people were knowledgeable about recipes for glues, leather working and body paint.

Global climate cooled during the last ice age between about 60,000 and 20,000 years ago. Archaeological surveys show that the number of sites with MSA artefacts dating to this time period declined. One hypothesis is that the human population numbers declined because the carrying capacity of the land for hunter-gatherers was reduced by cooler temperatures and lower rainfall. Global temperatures were reduced by an annual average of 7 degrees C at the peak of the ice age about 20,000 years ago and as a result of the quantity of water that was locked up in the ice caps at the north and south poles, sea level dropped worldwide by as much as 130 m. This exposed the continental shelf off the southern tip of Africa. It is also possible, therefore, that the hunter-gatherers, who were already making regular use of sea food, moved southwards with the changing coastline which, by 20,000 years ago was between 80 and 100 km south of its present position off Cape Agulhas and 30 or 40 km west of the west coast. Any MSA or early LSA sites on this continental shelf would now be underwater as they were covered by rising sea levels when the ice melted between 14,000 and 10,000 years ago.

The Later Stone Age

Stone tools that gradually replaced the MSA between about 40,000 and 20,000 years ago became noticeably smaller, perhaps an indication that the raw materials were used more economically. Because the LSA remains are younger than those of the MSA, the LSA sites in the Western Cape tend to preserve more bones from animals that were hunted and eaten by the inhabitants. From about 10,000 years ago people in the Western Cape began burying their dead, sometimes in the rock

shelters where they lived or in the shell middens they accumulated along the coast. Some of the bodies were decorated with ostrich eggshell, marine shell or bone beads and pendants, occasionally painted stones covered the grave, and at other times the grave was sealed with a layer of powdered ochre. Some of the people buried in this way had physical features similar to those of the indigenous San population, and many of the tools that were made were still being made by the San during the last few hundred years.

The LSA saw the heyday of rock paintings and rock engravings in southern Africa. In the Western Cape alone there are more than 3,500 rock painting sites that are likely to date within the last seven thousand years. It is essentially a religious art that illustrates the rituals performed by trance healers and the animals they believed would help them to reach power from the spirit world for rain-making, healing the sick, and controlling the game. The placement of paintings probably marked sites where events or experiences took place. Five rock shelters with paintings have been recorded in the Wemmershoek Dam area and there is at least one site in the Hottentots Holland. Older, so-called 'fine line' paintings, are considered to have been done by hunter-gatherers until about one thousand years ago. So-called 'finger paintings', with paint applied with a finger or thick brush instead of a fine brush or applicator, are considered to have been made more recently, perhaps within the last one or two thousand years. They tend to be in the form of geometric patterns, dots and lines, but hand prints, stylised human figures and animals also occur. There is a possibility that this tradition was also connected with ritual and religious beliefs, but in this case with the Khoekhoe herders.

The introduction of domesticated sheep

Evidence for domesticated sheep in the Western Cape about two thousand years ago has been documented by sheep bones and fired clay pottery amongst LSA artefacts. There has been much speculation about how the livestock were introduced. One theory is that a migrant population that originated in north-east Africa either moved the whole way with their sheep into South Africa, or passed the herding culture on to a Khoe-speaking group in Botswana/Zimbabwe that subsequently migrated southwards. Another theory is that there was only minimal migration of people from north-eastern Africa and sheep were acquired by Stone Age hunter-gatherers who worked as shepherds for Iron Age farmers and gradually acquired the skills of animal husbandry. The exact route taken by sheep and/or people is unclear, but the earliest dates obtained for sheep have come from Namibia, Botswana and the western and southern coast of South Africa. Studies of the DNA of living Khoekhoe-speakers show a strong affinity with the DNA of San hunter-gatherers, but not with Bantu-speakers. There are also similarities between some San and Khoekhoe languages, confirming that there must have been strong ties between them in the last 2000 years.

More is known about the lifestyle of the Khoekhoe herders than about the San hunter-gatherers in the Western Cape because written records and illustrations made by European travellers from the late 15th century onwards were mainly about the people with whom the travellers traded and interacted. Maps drawn by the Dutch in the early 18th century, a little more than half a century after Van Riebeeck established a trading post in Cape Town, show the approximate location of kraals of named Khoekhoe groups in the Stellenbosch and Franschhoek valleys (Malan 2017).



Cape Colony c.1700 (UCT Digital Archive).



Map from Valentyn's Travels (1971) compiled c.1720 from various sources.

The first recorded meeting between the Soaqua (sometimes also referred to as the Mountain People) and the DEIC took place in April 1655 somewhere between present-day Malmesbury and Wellington, three years after the arrival of Van Riebeeck. Jan Wintervogel reported to Van Riebeeck that they were short of stature and 'quite wild', without huts or cattle and speaking almost the same as the Khoekhoen. It is possible that the meeting took place near what is known today as Sonkwadri. (H.B. Thom, 1952. Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, Volume I, 1651-1655. Cape Town: Balkema, p.305.) Thereafter, Soaqua were met regularly along the Olifants River in 1660-1661 and in 1685 during the journey made by Simon van der Stel to Namaqualand. Dapper also described the

Soaquas as living 'in massive mountainous country' and as 'extremely great plunderers and marauders'. It would seem that although the Soaqua made forays onto the coastal plain and the Olifants River valley, they preferred the safety of the mountains.

It is from Dutch colonial maps that it is possible for the first time to know the names of groups of indigenous herders and their leaders from the diaries of Van Riebeeck and the correspondence and reports of subsequent governors. It has been much more difficult to find archaeological traces of the herders. Their camps were ephemeral as they moved around to find the best grazing for their livestock and did not apparently build up middens or rubbish dumps. Their kraals and dwellings were made of wood and reeds and have not survived, and much of the land has been under vineyards and other crops for at least 200 years.

As noted by Malan (2017), "The Drakenstein region was 'discovered' by Europeans while on expeditions to barter for cattle with the Khoekhoen. San hunter-gatherer resources had been impacted by the introduction of domestic livestock about 2000 years previously and San groups had mostly moved away from areas suitable for pasturing herds of sheep and cattle. The Berg River Valley formed the traditional border between the Peninsular Khoekhoen (the Gorachoqua and the Goringhaiqua) and the Cochoqua. The Peninsulars used the pastures between the Hottentots Holland Mountains and the Cape Peninsula and possibly as far north as Malmesbury. The Chariguriqua appear to have occupied the lower Berg River and points around the Piketberg and the Cochoqua the land from Saldanha Bay and the Vredenburg Peninsula across to Porterville. In the 1730s both the Khoekhoen and the San intensified guerrilla attacks against settler farmers in the Piketberg area, on the northern frontier of permanent land grants. The Caledon plains were occupied by the Chainoqua, a large and powerful group who later brought stock to trade with the colony."