RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF PREHISTORY IN THE CAPE

by

John Parkington

This paper has been written in order to describe to an audience of historians some recent developments in prehistoric studies, largely in the southern Cape region of South Africa. It has been assumed that historians are most concerned with two areas of possible advance: the changing methods and aims of prehistorians in so far as these affect the sorts of projects pursued and conclusions sought; and the emerging picture of the distribution of population groups immediately prior to the appearance of written documentation, and their inter-relationships. Since the publication of what are probably the best known syntheses of the late prehistoric period in South Africa (Clark 1959, Inskeep 1967, and Clark 1970), there have been important changes of emphasis and advances in research which it is the purpose of this paper to describe. The first section will deal briefly with the changes in research orientation, the second with the current state of knowledge, under the economic headings of Hunter-gatherers, Herders and Strandlopers.

I Methodology

The prehistoric occupants of the Cape Province with whom Europeans came into contact increasingly from the early sixteenth century were stone-using peoples, now generally described as Khoisan but falling within the archaeological category Late Stone Age. Although other questions would now be considered of more interest, the dominant theme within Late Stone Age studies from their inception in the 1920s was the recognition and interpretation of two entities within that general framework, known as the Wilton and the Smithfield. Almost all other aspects of the Later Stone Age were referred back to this standard dichotomy. For example, when archaeological nomenclature developed along cultural lines, these two became increasingly identified as separate cultural streams or traditions, ending up as perhaps techno-complexes in recent terminology. When questions arose, such as "Who were the painters or engravers during the Late Stone Age?" "Who herded sheep and who did not?", or "How many different physical types could be identified in the Late Stone Age skeletal sample?", answers were always couched in terms of the by now well entrenched dichotomy. Since this Wilton-Smithfield dichotomy has always been based on rather inadequate and, in any case, stone tool orientated collections and comparisons, it has produced a picture of the Late Stone Age which must surely have been meaningless to all except dedicated typologists. Presumably it was always an unsatisfactory record for historians to have to integrate into the picture presented by the very early written descriptions.

In recent years there seems to have been growing interest amongst pre-historians in producing a different sort of prehistory and one which would fit better into the picture generated by the historic documents. One of the underpinnings of the change in attitude has been the detailed and suggestive research carried out by Mrs J. Deacon, initially at the Wilton-type site and subsequently at other sites in the eastern and southern Cape (see Figure 1). Her results may be summarized as follows

(for the original reports, see Deacon J., 1972a, 1974): as a result of the re-excavations at Wilton it was clear that the entity now termed Wilton is in fact a dynamic technological tradition which passes through at least three clear phases - an early Wilton with few segments and fairly large scrapers; a middle or "classic" Wilton with the highly characteristic segments in some numbers and with rather smaller scrapers; and a later or "post classic" Wilton with, again, fewer segments and relatively larger scrapers. Finally, pottery appears in the Wilton sequence. On the evidence from the Wilton type site, it is only the middle phase, roughly dated to between 7000 and 4000 BC, in which the classic Wilton tool type, the segment, is at all common. Mrs Deacon has perceptively pointed out that it is surely no coincidence that this "classic" phase corresponds in time fairly well with the so-called "Smithfield gap", a period of several thousand years in which there are no dated Smithfield assemblages. Her point is that in the early and later phases of the Wilton sequence, when the "type tools" are rare and scrapers are large (as in the Smithfield) and numerous (as in the Smithfield), it would not be surprising to find some assemblages referred to as Smithfield, others as Wilton, since they are hardly separable, if at all. But in the middle phase, where the "type tools" are more common, it is hardly surprising that no Smithfield assemblages have been recognized. All of this is explicable if in fact there has only been one dominant technological tradition in the southern part of Africa during the Late Stone Age, but if its earlier and later stages were, unfortunately, referred to two separate "cultures". This has perhaps happened because even within the single evolving tradition there have been local idiosyncrasies and some regional modifications of either typology or technology brought about simply by the use of different raw materials in different areas.

Mrs Deacon's conclusions are strengthened by other developments, of which the implications are being felt well beyond the confines of the Cape. That is simply that archaeologists no longer dogmatically claim a one to one relationship between assemblage character and historic (or prehistoric) human groupings. It is clear that the same group may well have manufactured quite different assemblages at various times of the year, as a reflection of their changing behavioural needs. Moreover, this will be accompanied by undoubted tendencies for local peculiarities in tool manufacture, perhaps lasting thousands of years, by variations owing to the differing availability of stone resources, and by some technological modifications resulting from the variations in food resources and thus hunting or gathering strategies. In short, stone tools are a reflection of activities in particular environmental contexts, and not simply "fossils" identifying particular "cultures" (though this may still be possible).

As a corollary of this last point, stone tools may now, in circumstances where preservation permits, be regarded as just one of many sets of data which archaeologists must consider in the writing of prehistory. There is a strong tendency now to accentuate the contribution which animal bones, plant remains and site locational data may make towards the reconstruction of prehistoric life ways. Once again, to cut short what could be a long discussion, the result is an interest in a prehistory which stresses man-environment relations and the change in those relations through time. The questions are no longer "Am I dealing with a Wilton or a Smithfield site?" or "What are the origins of the Smithfield?" but "What does this assemblage of artefacts with its associated non-artefactual remains tell us of the socio-economic and technological behaviour of the group responsible for it?" or "How were the prehistoric groups in a particular environmental framework organized so as to exploit its resources as far as their technology allowed?"

This change of emphasis should enable archaeologists to begin to phrase their prehistory in terms which are relevant to historians. It should allow archaeologists to reconstruct the subsistence strategies and settlement patterns of prehistoric groups, and possibly the demographic aspects of population. Once this begins to happen, then historians and prehistorians may be talking in terms of population densities, economic behaviour and social organization.

II State of Knowledge

(a) Hunter-Gatherers

All of the sites marked on Figure 1 fall within the physiographic region of the Southern Cape, defined as the coastal forelands and the mountains of the Cape Folded Belt (see Wellington, 1955). With the exceptions of Gordon's Bay, Hawston and Chalumna River Mouth, the sites are all in caves or rock shelters and have usually been interpreted as the home bases or temporary camps of small groups of hunter-gatherers (refs. from north, then west to east: Parkington and Poggenpoel, 1971; Parkington,1972; Maggs and Speed, 1967; Schweitzer, 1970; Schweitzer and Scott, 1973; Inskeep,1965; Klein, 1972; Deacon, H. J. and J, 1963; Deacon, H. J., 1969; Deacon, J., 1972; and Derricourt, 1973). This seems reasonable in view of the historically well documented use of caves by hunting groups and preference for open sites amongst herders, and is consistent with the occupational residues recovered from those sites. This dichotomy should not, however, be inflexibly maintained in the face of increasing numbers of bones of domestic stock in caves and rock shelters.

As a result of in-depth studies of plant remains, animal bones and site locational regularities, it is now possible to outline the economic strategies of hunting and gathering communities from purely archaeological data. There can be very little doubt that groups depended for day to day subsistence upon collected foods, such as the root stocks of iridaceae, edible fruits, honey, caterpillars, termites, locusts, tortoises and small ground game such as hares, dune mole rats and dassies. The bulk of this food was provided by women and children, whilst men contributed high protein but less predictable game, notably small antelopes such as the steenbok, grysbok or dinker.

This system seems to have successfully supported hunting and gathering communities through most of the year, but may not have provided a complete year-round food supply. Evidence now accumulating on the seasonal availabilities of essential day to day foods such as were listed above suggests that fewer staples would have been exploitable during the winter months. This seems more clearly established in the western arm of the Cape Folded Belt, where the environment is markedly seasonal and divided into a wet cold winter merging into a hot dry summer (see Talbot, 1947; Wicht, 1945). The implications of this are reflected in the growth cycle of the plants of the iridaceae, the "uynties" of the historical documents. These plants solve the problem of survival during a long hot and dry summer by storing energy in the form of a basal stem swelling or corm, which lies dormant through the summer and regenerates at the onset of the winter rains. The corm , largely starch, is protected by many layers of corm tunic, the remains of which are super-abundant in sites within the Cape Folded Belt. Obviously the women made daily collections of these corms , digging them up with the traditional digging stick, bored stone and leather bag. But during the period of rapid growth and flowering, in this area the wet winter and spring, the plants themselves use up their store of energy and thus cannot contribute the quantities of dependable food upon which the human groups rely.

Whilst not all genera of iridaceae grow and flower at precisely the same time, it is possible to argue that collectable foods such as fruits, corms and probably also caterpillars, honey, and tortoises would be at a minimum during the winter and spring. The evidence is now accumulating that it was at these times of year that hunter-gatherers turned to a more extensive exploitation of marine resources. Shellfish are as immobile, and therefore as dependable, as corms or fruits and could have provided the necessary day to day subsistence in place of plant staples. At the moment, suggestive evidence for the seasonal use of coastal caves and shelters is restricted to observations from Elands Bay Cave (Parkington, 1972, 1976) and Nelson Bay Cave (Shackleton, 1973). Nor is there any real reason why the ecologically "sensible" time to occupy coastal sites should be the same as the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts. These patterns of mobility need much more documentation.

The assumptions of this ongoing research are that the territories of hunting and gathering groups would have included sets of resources sufficient to maintain the groups through the seasonal cycle, and that the settlement patterns adopted would have been designed to exploit temporary and/or localized abundances by various techniques, such as mobility, scheduling, storage and the fission and fusion of groups according to circumstances. When more research is completed it may be possible to point to contact zones, where groups, normally separate, came together and exchanged gifts, information, women and technological innovations. In the west, this may be the inner regions of the mountain belt where at times the resource base may have enabled groups from the karoo and sandveld areas to meet, live in rather higher densities for a while, and then separate, having forged and renewed important social relations.

(b) Herders.

This picture of hunting and gathering within defined environmental contexts is, of course, seriously incomplete when dealing with the immediate pre-colonial period. At every site marked on Figure 1, with the exception of Bonteberg, Klasies River and Gordons Bay (where they have not been actively sought), there are the remains of domestic stock in Late Stone Age contexts. Since there are no indigenous sheep, goats or cattle, and since these assemblages pre-date contact with European or Negro herders, it must be assumed that such records reflect the appearance of herded stock from another source. The appearance of the bones of sheep and, for convenience, pottery at sites from Angola to the Eastern Cape is summarized in Figure 2. Also included is the rather sparse information on these items from inland areas and, for reference, the earliest dates presently available for the penetration of iron-using, Bantu-speaking mixed farmers into southern Africa. There are, of course, a number of problems involved in using this sort of data, some of them resulting from inadequate and patchy investigation, others from the imprecision of many published contexts. However, it seems worthwhile risking some comments on the basis of the regularities and trends apparent.

The most obvious point is that pot sherds appear for the first time in sites from Angola to the southern Cape during the period 2000 to 1600 BP. The tendency is clearly for this period to contract rather than to expand as data accumulate, and it may be that the precision of C^{14} dating will ultimately fail to discriminate between these events throughout the whole region. Only four dates greater than 2000 have been reported, and there are reasons for supposing that all are either seriously contaminated (Sampson, 1974) or pre-pottery (Schweitzer and Scott, 1973; Maggs, personal communication; Wadley, personal communication).

A second and no less important observation is that in all cases where domestic stock have been specifically sought they appear as early as pot sherds. This may not be true in every case, but when dates from neighbouring sites are condensed to form local sequences, then the picture is as stated. Although this procedure may seem unjustified, it can be defended as ironing out problems caused by purely sampling phenomena. The implication is that pot sherds and domestic stock diffused at the same time through the same area. The word "diffused" seems inescapable since, whereas pottery could be independently invented, domestic sheep obviously could not. Moreover, the pottery shows no signs of being crude or inefficient early attempts at a technological innovation.

A point of considerable, though as yet not definitive, importance is that the distribution of dates associated with early sheep and pottery covers the coastal plain and adjacent mountain chains along 2000 miles of the Atlantic coast and along the Indian Ocean coast as far east as the Robberg Peninsula. Whilst this may in part reflect the understandable preoccupation of archaeologists with the depositional sequences of caves in the Cape Folded Belt, there is some reason to suppose that the absence of early dates east of the Kei and north of the Folded Belt is meaningful (see Sampson, 1974; Derricourt, 1973; Carter, 1970). As it is, the distribution of early dates for both sheep and pottery coincides well with the historic distribution of pastoralists known collectively as Khoi (see Maingard, 1931).

Although there is ongoing research into the spread of iron into southern Africa, present evidence is that the earliest domestic arrivals and pottery in Iron Age contexts south of the Limpopo date from the fourth and fifth centuries AD (see Klapwijk, 1973; Mason, 1974; Beaumont and Vogel, 1972). Thus the set of Late Stone Age dates associated with these two features predates that of the Iron Age further north and east by fully two to three hundred years, an interval surely not an artefact of radio carbon dating.

The implication of this distributional, chronological and contextual pattern seems to be that herding peoples with pottery spread rapidly into the southern Cape along a westerly coastal route roughly two thousand years before the present. It seems inescapable that these peoples were those recorded historically by early voyagers and later settlers as "Ottentoos" or "Hottentots", better known as Khoi pastoralists (Wilson & Thomson, 1969). Whether groups of hunters were integrated into the pastoralist societies and whether there was a period of settlement change, as there seemingly must have been, remain contemporary research topics. It seems likely that the rapid diffusion of herders into the southern Cape would have produced an exciting, but as yet largely undocumented, upheaval in demography and man-land relations. (For a discussion of this in the eastern Cape, see Deacon, J., 1972 b.)

If the appearance of pot sherds and domesticated animals does reflect the movement of populations into the western Cape, then it is logical to ask where and under what circumstances were these attributes acquired? The early dates seem to rule out contact with Iron Age herders south of the Limpopo, or even perhaps south of the Zambezi. There are too many gaps to make any but the most general guesses, but future research must obviously examine closely the situation in northern Zambia and southern Tanzania, as well as the differences and similarities between Late Stone Age pottery in the south and early Iron Age pottery further north. Some of the arguments advanced by C. K. Cooke (1965) some years ago could well be re-examined in this context.

Unfortunately, the number of undoubted herder sites excavated remains minimal; indeed, unless some of the scatters of surface artefacts or some of the middens or rock shelter occupations turn out to be the residues of herders, the number is precisely nil. Certainly there are no claims in the literature, except those in the Middleberg area by Derricourt (1973). The ecology of the herders, therefore, remains a target for future archaeological research, assuming that the residues of herding groups cross the threshold of archaeological visibility.

(c) Strandlopers

How, then, can the "strandlopers" be incorporated into an overview of the economies practised by occupants of the Cape prior to European settlement? Some distinction should be made between the"beachrangers" or "strandlopers" met with at Table Bay and those further afield to whom the same label was subsequently applied. Some European vessels had been calling at Table Bay regularly since at least the beginning of the sixteenth century, and,since they introduced new resources into the catchment area of that "site", it must be argued that the Table Bay populations were unique and responding to a unique situation. These people, who in the 1650s seem to have numbered about 50 (Van Riebeeck Diaries, Thom, 1954), may have been dispossessed cattle owners who had turned more or less permanently to the exploitation of marine resources (including European visitors), since they readily stole and herded cattle when the opportunity arose; or they may have been a group of "client" hunters who were related to and perhaps subservient to local herding groups. Whatever the solution, their unique opportunities for exploration make them unsuitable as holotypes for any sort of subsistence economy in pre-contact South Africa. Groups who were subsequently observed utilizing the products of the sea shore seem either to have been hunters or herders at some point in their seasonal cycle of activities and not permanent "strandlopers".

Not all archaeologists, however, would agree with this viewpoint, and it must still be described as debatable. Sampson (1974), for example, has argued that there must have been separate populations of "bushmen" and "strandlopers" in the mountains of the Gedarberg and western coastal strip, respectively, though he does admit that inland territories may have included stretches of coast. The crux of this position seems to be that there may be assemblages along the coast different in character from their neighbours and that these differences must reflect "cultural" boundaries. Apart from the fact that coastal assemblages from the west coast at least are undocumented and deficient in formal tools, the argument seems to neglect the possibility that any differences may as well be behavioural as cultural. The precise ways in which coastal resources were exploited, except in the most general sense, remains to be investigated and more documentation of associations between food resources, site locations, raw material outcrops and stone tool regularities is needed before the various positions can be evaluated. Having said this, it may be suggested that ethnographic analogies, ecological considerations, incomplete archaeological analyses and fragmentary historic records point to the occupation of coastal sites at restricted times of the year (Parkington, 1974, unpublished).

Acknowledgement

The archaeologists of the southern Cape generously made available to me much unpublished information, and I would like to express my gratitude to them. The paper summarizes work by the following researchers, with a bias and interpretation which is entirely my own: Graham Avery and Frank Schweitzer of the South African Museum in Cape Town; Janette Deacon of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town; Hilary Deacon of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Stellenbosch; Richard Klein of the University of Chicago; Ray Inskeep of the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford; and Kate Scott of New Hall College, Cambridge.

--------oOo--------

References

Carter, P. L., 1970: "Late Stone Age exploitation patterns in southern Natal", South African Archaeological Bulletin 25, 55-58.

Clark, J. D., 1959: The Prehistory of Southern Africa (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books).

Clark, J. D., 1970: The Prehistory of Africa (London: Thames and Hudson).

Cooke, C. K., 1965: "Evidence of human migrations from the Rock Art of Southern Rhodesia", Africa XXXV, 263-85.

Deacon, H. J., 1969: "Melkhoutboom Cave, Alexandria District, Cape Province: a report on the 1967 investigation", Ann. Cape Prov. Mus. 6, 141-49.

Deacon, H. J. and J., 1963: "Scotts Cave: a Late Stone Age site in the Gamtoos Valley", Ann. Cape Prov. Mus. 3, 96-121.

Deacon, J., 1972 a: "Wilton: an assessment after 50 years", S. Afr. Archaeol. Bull. 27, 10-45.

Deacon, J., 1972 b: "Archaeological Evidence for Demographic Changes in the Eastern Cape during the last 2000 years", paper presented to conference of the SA Association of Archaeologists. September. Johannesburg.

Deacon, J. 1974: "Patterning in the Radiocarbon Dates for the Wilton/Smithfield Complex in Southern Africa", S. Afr. Archaeol. Bull. 29, 3-18.

Derricourt, R. M., 1973: Archaeological Survey of the Transkei and Ciskei: Interim Report for 1972. Fort Hare Papers 5, 449-55.

Inskeep, R. R., 1965: "University of Cape Town excavations at Plettenberg Bay", Scient. S. Afr. 2, 575-77.

Inskeep, R. R., 1967: "The Late Stone Age" in Bishop, W. W., and Clark, J. D. (eds), Background to Evolution in Africa (Chicago University Press), 557-82.

Klein, R. G., 1972: "Preliminary report on the July through September 1970 excavations at Nelson Bay Cave, Plettenberg Bay (Cape Province, South Africa)", in Van Zinderen Bakker, E. M. (ed), Palaeoecology of Africa 4, 177-208.

Maggs, T. M. O'C. and Speed, E., 1967: "Bonteberg Shelter", S. Afr. Archaeol. Bull 22, 80-93.

Maingard, L. F., 1931: "The Lost Tribes of the Cape", S. Afr. Journ. Sci. 28, 487-504.

Parkington, J. E., 1972: "Seasonal mobility in the Late Stone Age", Afr. Stud. 31, 223-243.

Parkington, J. E., 1976 "Follow the San: Settlement and Subsistence in the Late Stone Age of the western Cape", PhD, Univ. of Cape Town.

Parkington, J. E. and Poggenpoel, C., 1971: "Excavations at De Hangen, 1968", S. Afr. Archaeol. Bull. 26, 3-36.

Sampson, C. G., 1974: The Stone Age Archaeology of Southern Africa.

Schweitzer, F. R., 1970: "A preliminary report of excavations of a cave at Die Kelders", S. Afr. Archaeol. Bull 25, 136-8.

Schweitzer, F. R. and Scott, K. 1973: "Early occurrence of domestic sheep in sub-Saharan Africa", Nature 241, 547.

Shackleton, N. J., 1973: "Oxygen isotope analysis as a means of determining season of occupation of prehistoric midden sites", Archaeometry 15 (1), 133-41.

Talbot, W. J., 1947: Swartland and Sandveld (Cape Town: OUP).

Thom, H. B., 1954: The Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, Van Riebeeck Society (Cape Town: Balkema).

Wellington: J. H., 1955: Southern Africa: a Geographical Study. Vol I, Physical Geography (Cambridge University Press).

Wicht, C. L., 1945: Preservation of the vegetation of the Southwestern Cape. Special publication of the Royal Society of South Africa (Cape Town).

Wilson, M. and Thompson, L. (eds) 1969: The Oxford History of South Africa (Oxford).