

South African History (The Early Inhabitants)

Written by Administrator

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There seems to be general agreement among scholars that humankind had its earliest origins in Africa. South Africa is rich in fossil evidence of the evolutionary history of the human family, going back several million years. From the discovery of the skull of a Taung child in 1924 to the latest discoveries of hominid fossils at Sterkfontein caves, recently declared a World Heritage Site, and the ground-breaking work done at Blombos Cave in the Southern Cape - all have put South Africa at the forefront of paleontology research into the origins of humanity.

Modern humans have lived in the region for over 100,000 years. The small, mobile bands of Stone Age hunter-gatherers, who created a wealth of rock art, were the ancestors of the Khoikhoi and San of historical times.

The Khoekhoen and San (the 'Hottentots' and 'Bushmen' of early European terminology), although collectively known as the Khoisan, are often thought of as distinct peoples.

The former were those who, some 2,000 years ago, adopted a pastoral lifestyle herding sheep and, later, cattle. Whereas the hunter-gatherers adapted to local environments and were scattered across the subcontinent, the herders sought out the pasturelands between modern-day Namibia and the Eastern Cape, which, generally, are near the coast.

At around the same time, Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists began arriving in southern Africa, bringing with them an Iron Age culture and domesticated crops.

After establishing themselves in the well-watered eastern coastal region of Southern Africa, these farmers spread out across the interior plateau, or 'highveld', where they adopted a more extensive cattle-farming culture. Chiefdoms arose, based on control over cattle, which gave rise to systems of patronage and hence hierarchies of authority within communities.

Cattle exchanges formed the basis of polygamous marriage arrangements, facilitating the accumulation of social power through control over the labor of kin groups and dependants.

Metallurgical skills, developed in the mining and processing of iron, copper, tin and gold, promoted regional trade and craft specialization.

At several archaeological sites, such as Mapungubwe and Thulamela in the Limpopo Valley, there is evidence of sophisticated political and material cultures, based in part on contact with the East African trading economy.

These cultures, which were part of a broader African civilization, predate European encroachment by several centuries. Settlement patterns varied from the dispersed homesteads of the fertile coastal regions in the east to the concentrated towns of the desert fringes to the west.

The farmers did not, however, extend their settlement into the western desert or the winter-rainfall region to the south-west. These regions remained the preserve of the Khoisan until Europeans put down roots at the Cape of Good Hope. This meant that the farmers were little affected by the white presence for the first century during which European settlement

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expanded from the Western Cape.

Currently, aided by modern science and contributing to uncovering the continent's past which forms part of the African Renaissance, South Africa is gaining a greater understanding of its rich pre-colonial past and African achievements that were to be disrupted and all but hidden from sight in the period that followed.

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