

Book Reviews

Early Man in South Africa

Where Hunters Gathered. A Study of Holocene Stone Age People in the Eastern Cape. H. J. DEACON. South African Archaeological Society, Claremont, 1976. xvi, 232 pp., illus. Paper, R 7.50. South African Archaeological Society Monograph Series, No. 1.

The record of prehistoric human activities in South Africa is long and complex, for hominids have lived there at least since the beginning of the Pleistocene. Much interest has focused on the Transvaal limestone cave breccias and their content of *Australopithecus*. This is quite understandable but sometimes obscures the fact that sophisticated Stone Age archeology is also being practiced in the Cape, particularly at sites located on or near the coastline. This work emphasizes Upper Pleistocene and Holocene developments, and much of it is interdisciplinary. Cave sediment and other geological studies and faunal and plant analyses, as well as archeological reports on cultural assemblages, are increasingly available. Middle Stone Age occupation of sites such as Klasies River Mouth and Nelson Bay Cave is now known to extend into Last Interglacial times, and Late Stone Age sequences reaching back 15,000 to 20,000 years are fairly common. Information concerning hunting strategies and food preferences is adding to our knowledge of the ecology of these earlier South Africans, whose activities can be related to climatic fluctuations, vegetation shifts, and faunal extinctions.

Where Hunters Gathered is a fine addition to this growing literature. The author is one of the most active of South African archeologists, and the book offers a detailed report on excavations carried out in the eastern Cape between 1963 and 1971. It is mainly a tale of two caves, Melkhoutboom and Highlands Rock Shelter, which are located in different environmental zones. Several broad aims emerge from an initial section on research design. One is to elucidate the subsistence ecology of Holocene populations in the Cape Folded Mountain Belt, and this is accomplished by analysis of the artifactual, plant, and ani-

mal remains from Melkhoutboom Cave. Another is to check for differences in artifacts and resource use that may show up at other sites, such as Highlands in the more northerly Karoo-Cape midlands.

Melkhoutboom provides the longer sequence of occupation, which begins about 15,000 years ago. Some stone material has been recovered from the late Upper Pleistocene and terminal Pleistocene levels, but samples are small, and extensive descriptions of the Robberg and Albany industries are not attempted. Many more formal tools occur in the late Wilton horizons, and these are discussed in more detail. However, the section on stone artifacts takes up only about one-fourth of the space devoted to all aspects of excavation, and Deacon has tried hard to move from a lithocentric view of prehistory toward a discussion based on faunal and floral materials. Plant remains are not well preserved in the earlier levels, and animal bone is rather scarce. But there is more bone relative to stone artifacts in the pre-Wilton assemblages, and diurnal, gregarious grazers dominate the list of mammalian species present.

Holocene levels dated after about 7500 years ago are rich in lithic and nonlithic artifacts as well as plant and animal remains. The Melkhoutboom inhabitants of this period utilized a microlithic Wilton technology heavily dependent on backed tools, adzes, and borers, all of which must have been hafted. Faunal remains are essentially modern in character, and nocturnal, nongregarious browsing species of mammals are prevalent. This may denote a hunting strategy based on snares rather than projectiles. As environmental indicators, these animals imply the presence of bush, and an increase in scrub or bush at the expense of grassveld is probably an important part of the cultural-environmental shift leading to a Wilton way of life early in the Holocene. Plant material is abundantly preserved, and this is a striking feature of the site. Many items seem to have been gathered for food, and it may be fair to say that the Wilton people were more reliant on vegetable products than were their hunting forerunners of

the terminal Pleistocene. However, Melkhoutboom may not have been inhabited continuously, and many of the corms, bulbs, and rootstocks could best have been collected in the spring and early summer, during the season of maximum availability. Deacon suggests that the Holocene gatherers may have moved to the coast in wintertime, where shellfish would fill out the diet. This movement cannot be documented directly at Melkhoutboom, of course, but there is increasing evidence for seasonal occupation at other southern Cape sites, such as Nelson Bay Cave, and at Elands Bay Cave, currently being excavated by J. E. Parkington.

This picture of Holocene man-land relationships is highly useful. The rest of the book describes findings at the smaller, less rich Highlands site, and this provides some contrasts to Melkhoutboom. Stone artifacts from these caves illustrate the dichotomy recognized between Wilton and Smithfield industries in South Africa since 1926. This theme is developed at some length, in terms of cultural boundaries corresponding to ecological divisions. Deacon argues that the eastern region of the Cape Folded Belt has supported a stable Holocene population, linguistically coherent and firmly in the Wilton technological tradition. This population presumably has not had much contact with others to the north of the Folded Belt or to the west of the Gouritz River, where stylistically different artifactual assemblages occur.

This is all reasonable, but it would be nice to have some further evidence regarding the people themselves. Unfortunately the available skeletal remains are quite sparse, although there are several burials from Melkhoutboom. There is more human material from Matjes River and Oakhurst, also within the area to which the term Wilton in a strict sense can be applied. These skeletons are not all well preserved and many are of uncertain stratigraphic provenance, but it is important that this material be studied systematically, for there is of course no guarantee that better remains will be forthcoming. Deacon's hypotheses should be integrated with biological work on the skeletons if a fuller understanding of prehistoric population movements and evolution in the Cape is to be obtained.

Deacon's book should be in the libraries of everyone who has an interest in hunter-gatherer adaptations, in Africa or elsewhere.

G. P. RIGHTMIRE

Department of Anthropology, State University of New York, Binghamton 13901