





Early inhabitants

MPUMALANGA HARBOURS evidence of the earliest phases of the history of our planet. The area around Barberton contains one of the oldest and best-preserved rock sequences found anywhere on earth. It is of enormous interest to scientists researching the nature of our planet about 3,5 billion years ago. Particularly significant is the discovery in these rocks of microscopic traces of the world's oldest life forms, which suggests that Mpumalanga was a cradle of life.

But the geology of the province has many other tales to tell. It provides glimpses of the inner core of the early earth, the surface of the first continent, the position and influence of the Moon, and the mass extinction of species 250 million years ago that set the scene for contemporary forms of life. Embedded in this extraordinary geology are the gold, iron and platinum ores that have played such an important part in the more recent history of the region, and the unrivalled reserves of coal, formed in vast swamps from rotting forests 200 to 300 million years ago, that now make Mpumalanga the powerhouse of South Africa.

Mpumalanga is also rich in archaeological sites that tell the considerably briefer story of humans and their predecessors in the region going back some 1,7 million years. While only a fraction of this material has been properly investigated, research conducted in the province gives us an idea of the region's early history.

We begin with hominids, the ancestors to modern humans, who looked a bit like apes but could walk upright. Because of Mpumalanga's unfavourable climate no fossils of hominids have been found, but archaeologists have found parts of hominid skeletons and many stone tools that provide us with insights into their world.

The earliest stone tools are known as Oldowan tools, named after Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, where their importance was first noted. The tools were made by striking off flakes of stone from cobbles. They had sharp edges, and could be used to cut strips of meat from animals. These simple tools were probably made by an early member of our own genus, such as *Homo habilis*.

Facing page:
Precolonial stone
structure on the
Mpumalanga
escarpment.



Flake tools from the Middle Stone Age.

Facing page: Late Stone Age tools, sorted by type.

This made it easier to scavenge meat, and the increased quantities of protein hominids ate allowed their brains to develop further.

More refined stone tools, including hand axes or cleavers, have also been found in the eastern Transvaal. They date back about 1,7 million years, and are thought to have been made by *Homo ergaster*. They are known as Acheulean tools, named after Saint Acheul in France, where these types of tools were first discovered. For many thousands of years *Homo ergaster*, who had larger bodies and brains than *Homo habilis*, roamed the grasslands of the region, using their tools to butcher the animals they scavenged, crack bones to get to the nutritious marrow, and dig up roots for sustenance.

From hominids to humans

The period known as the Middle Stone Age began about 250 000 years ago, and continued until about 20 000 years ago. By then, hominids had evolved to look more like modern humans, and acted more like them as well.

They lived near water, and sometimes in caves, where they could shelter from the elements, particularly in periods when the climate was wet and cold. Tool-makers prepared cores of rock and struck off flakes which they would then refine to make the sharp heads of spears, knives and axes. These stone tools were hafted on to bone or wood, making them more efficient. Using these tools, hominids could hunt instead of scavenge for meat.

About 150 000 years ago hominids evolved into *Homo sapiens*. But it was a while before *Homo sapiens* began using decoration and symbolism – the first signs of those things that make us ‘human’.

Hunter-gatherers

The Later Stone Age began about 20 000 years ago, and, in the eastern Transvaal as well as elsewhere in Africa, only ended in the 19th century when the region underwent profound social, political and economic change. The Later Stone Age was a period of rapid social and technological advancement compared to the aeons that went before. Hunter-gatherers, ancestors of the Bushmen or San, lived throughout the eastern Transvaal. Archaeologists have investigated some of the old shelters in the present-day areas of Witbank, Ermelo, Barberton, Nelspruit, White River, Lydenburg, and Ohrigstad. Lake Chrissie, with its lakes, pans, caves and wide variety of game and edible plants, was an especially favoured area in more recent times.

The tool-makers of these societies developed a new weapon: the bow and arrow. The arrow tips were made of sharpened bone, and dipped into poison before use. The wooden shaft was loosely attached, so that it fell away on





Ostrich shell water bottle; bored stones used to lend weight to digging sticks.

impact. Arrows like these are known today as ‘link-shaft arrows’. With these advanced weapons hunters stalked zebra, warthog and buck, keeping a safe distance from their quarry. Larger game, such as elephant and giraffe, were driven into pits where they would be speared. Equipment was used to trap fish. Meanwhile, women used digging sticks, made more efficient with another innovation: bored stones, round stones with a hole drilled through the centre, in which the digging sticks were fitted. The increased weight of the implement made it easier to dig up roots and tubers.

Small stone tools were made for cutting meat and scraping hides, and bones were filed into fine tools such as needles. Twine was made from plant fibre or leather, tortoise shells were used as bowls, bone tools were decorated, and people began to adorn themselves with beaded necklaces made from ostrich eggshells. Their diet was varied; they ate tortoise meat and snails, fish and game, and a great variety of fruits, roots, tubers and vegetables.

Hunter-gatherers exercised a relatively high degree of control over their environment. They used shelters, hunted more easily, and lived in relative abundance. But some aspects of their surroundings remained dangerous and unpredictable. Wild animals remained a constant threat, and drought could spell starvation and death for the young, old, and weak members of society. The early hunter-gatherers believed they could control those unpredictable aspects of the world around them by spiritual means. Spiritual leaders, or shamans, led rituals and ceremonies to bring rain, or heal the sick or injured. During their trances they also visited the spirit world, and painted their visions on the walls of rock shelters. With brushes, sticks and quills, they drew pictures of animals as well as humans, some of them in states of trance, visiting the spirit world believed to lie behind the rock. Shamans believed they could fight malevolent spirits thought to bring misfortune and death in the spirit world. Animals such as kudu, giraffe, elephant, and roan antelope had a special significance for hunter-gatherers in the eastern and northern Transvaal. They believed they could invoke the spirits of those animals by imitating them in dances or painting them, and use their potency to bring rain or aid in healing.

Early farmers

The period between AD 400 and AD 1100 is known as the Early Iron Age. Early farmers arrived in the region from the north, bringing with them a different way of life, new technology, and trade. The early farmers and the hunter-gatherers interacted with each other. The early farmers had metal tools, beads, produce, and domestic animals that were valuable to the hunter-gatherers. The hunter-gatherers did some work for the early farmers in exchange for



Clockwise from top left: San rock painting, Mthethomusha game reserve. These mysterious plummeting figures are thought to derive from a state of trance. San hunter, Kruger National Park; Elephant, Nelspruit district.

Bracelets, spearheads
and arrowheads from
the Iron Age.



these commodities. They tended cattle, but more importantly could offer their hunting and ritual skills, as well as knowledge of the area, to the farmers. It is possible that early farmers valued the ceremonies of the San because the San were the first people there, and so had a greater ritual authority in a region still unknown to the new arrivals.

The farmers and hunter-gatherers did not always remain separate; at times they intermarried, and communities even merged. In some areas where caves were good places to live, farmers and hunter-gatherers would occupy the same rock shelter. There might have been some social divisions. Farmers lived deep in the caves, while San lived closer to the entrances. The farmers made metal tools and implements, and the San made fine stone tools. But these were not entirely complementary ways of life, and it is likely that conflict and competition also found their place in this long history.

The early farmers mined, smelted, and forged iron and other metals. When they moved into the area they often chose sites near rivers or streams. Here they cultivated millet and sorghum, and their cattle grazed in the nearby fields. At night, the cattle were kept in kraals to keep them safe from night-time ground predators. During the day, a whole range of activities took place. Women made beads and pottery and ground ochre and grain, while older daughters watched over the children, worked in the fields, fetched water, cooked, swept, and maintained the homestead. Boys, young men, and outsiders – people who had come to the settlement for security and had no wealth of their own – tended livestock. Some men would work metal and stone, and set off periodically in hunting parties. Hunting was still important for early farmer societies, since cattle were rarely consumed. Cattle were a form of wealth and were related to status and class. They were usually only consumed in very special or strategic situations. Those who lived in less fertile areas were even more dependent on hunting, since all available fertile land was set aside for cultivation, leaving less room for cattle to graze.

Early farmers believed that their ancestors watched over them, bringing fertility, rain and good fortune when pleased, and drought, death and misfortune when angered. They believed their ancestors could be angered by malefactors who had broken taboos or neglected customs. Rituals and ceremonies were performed to keep in close contact with the ancestors, so that they could bring good fortune, cleanse, forgive malefactors, or end misfortune. Rituals and ceremonies were also performed to mark rites of passage. While very little is known about these rituals and ceremonies, there are tantalising glimpses into this aspect of Mpumalanga's past.



Hoes from the Iron Age.



The famous Lydenburg Heads,
9th–11th century AD, found near
Lydenburg in the 1960s.

The Lydenburg Heads

In 1957 a young boy, Ludwig von Bezing, found some strangely shaped pieces of pottery on his father's farm near Lydenburg which seemed like pieces of human masks. Over the next few years he repeatedly returned to the site to collect more fragments as well as other artefacts, including pot shards, iron and copper beads, ostrich eggshell beads, and millstones. After completing school he went to study medicine at the University of Cape Town, where he brought the fragments to the attention of Ray Inskip, professor of archaeology. Realising their importance, Inskip excavated the site, and supervised the masks' reconstruction. Known as the Lydenburg Heads, they immediately became famous, partly because of their rarity and intriguing appearance, and partly because they reveal aspects of past cultural and ritual practices. They are on permanent display at the South African Museum in Cape Town.

Seven heads have been reconstructed. Highly detailed, each has facial features, intricate, scar-like patterns, and other incisions along the base of the neck. The smaller heads have teeth, with a gap in the middle. As a result, some scholars believe the heads were used in initiation rituals. The heads have been carbon-dated to about AD 500.

Similar pottery heads dating to the same period have been found near the KwaZulu-Natal coast. This seems to indicate that the societies which made them split up, with some members moving away. This shows that Early Farmer societies were by no means static or isolated. Societies changed, people came and went, ideas were spread, technology was shared or traded, as were other objects of utility, art and fashion. International trade had begun, while iron, copper, tin, salt and ochre were traded across the region.

Late Iron Age

Mpumalanga's escarpment – the sometimes gentle and sometimes dramatic slopes marking the transition from the highveld to the lowveld – has many positive attributes. Some Late Farmer societies, particularly people identified in oral histories as the BaKoni, took advantage of the hills, valleys and plains around the areas we know today as Lydenburg, Badfontein, Sekhukhuneland, Roosenekal and Steelpoort. These areas had fertile valleys and hill slopes, and offered panoramic views of the surrounding landscape – ideal for spotting passing traders or approaching enemies. These areas also had very little wood, but a lot of stone. This was used to build stone homesteads, which eventually developed into extensive stone settlements.

These typically consisted of three interrelated elements: homesteads, comprising an inner core of cattle kraals or enclosures, surrounded by



enclosures for human habitation; paths or roadways edged in stone, designed to channel the movement of cattle to and from their daily pastures; and stone terraces, aimed at creating level areas for cultivation on the fertile slopes leading down to rivers or streams. These terraces may have been irrigated, and the intensive agriculture that took place is one of the most distinctive characteristics of stone-walled settlements in the eastern Transvaal. Some communities also built small huts of stone – called corbelled huts – to protect young livestock, such as calves and lambs, against the elements. They may also have provided shelter for humans.

Some of the settlements were very extensive, and stretched for several kilometres; they really amounted to large towns built in stone. Their walls were so strong and well-built that many of them still stand today, intact but overgrown, and hidden from the eyes of all but the most attentive passing motorists.

Most of the homesteads were built in symmetrical patterns, which can be seen most clearly from the air. Remarkably, these patterns were reproduced in rock engravings, thought to have been made by youths while herding livestock, but also for ritual purposes, which have also survived until today. Many occur on the farm Boomplaats, outside Lydenburg, and were first recorded and publicised by the archaeologist E C N Van Hoepen in the early 20th century. Together, the stone settlements and rock engravings constitute a precious but largely unrecognised part of South Africa's heritage.

The communities that built these settlements varied in size, but were larger than many would believe possible for that time. In the 18th century, archaeologists estimate that as many as 40 000 people lived on the escarpment between latter-day Machadodorp and Lydenburg. People moved in and out of the area, interacted, and exchanged elements of culture. Communities were not divided into fixed, culturally isolated tribes. Instead, identities were fluid, partly because ample land allowed groups to respond to conflict and opportunity by moving and relocating. As a result, most groupings consisted of diverse populations with dynamic and open-ended cultures.

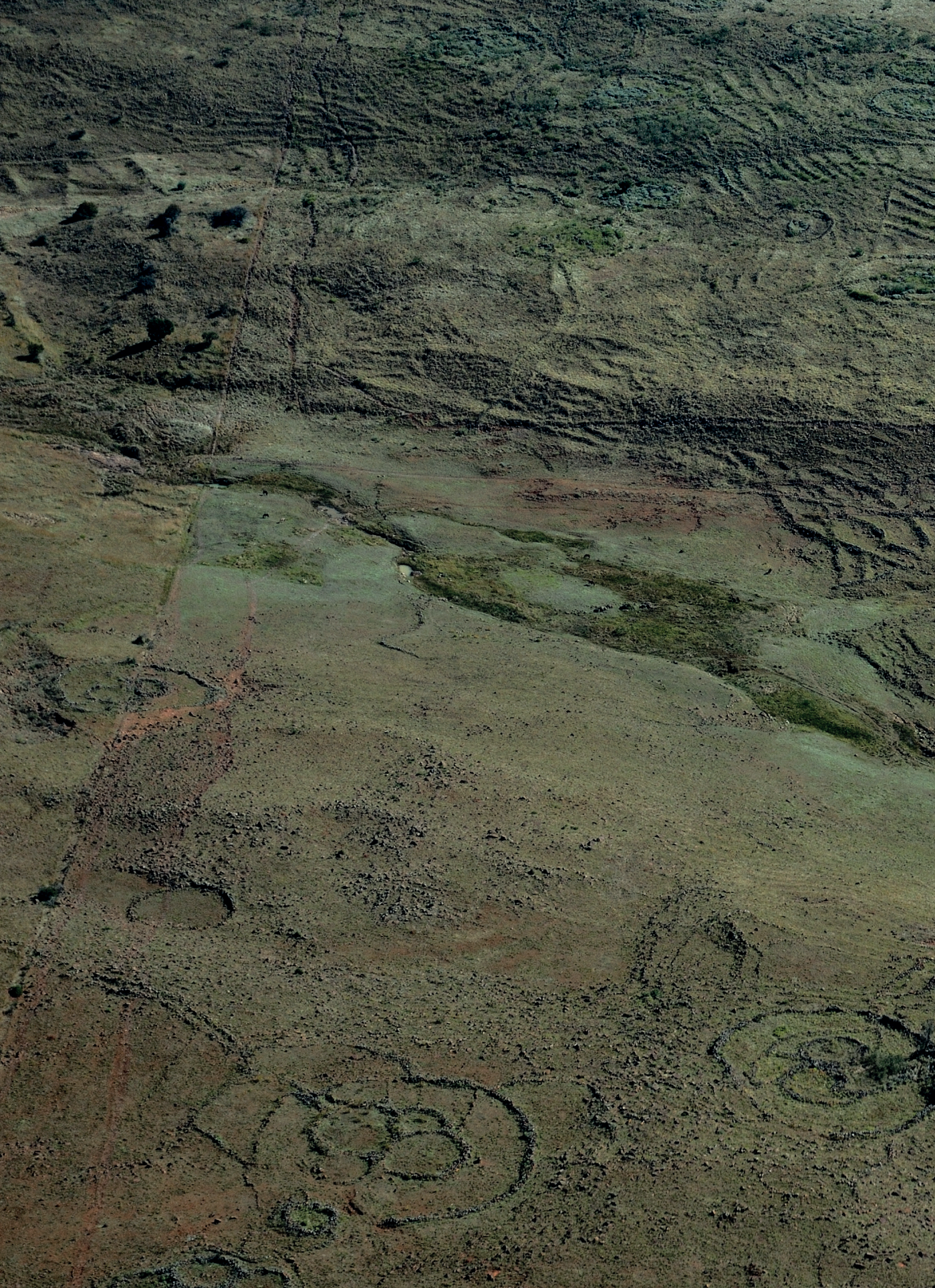
Cattle played a vital role in Late Iron Age societies. Cattle were not simply kept to be slaughtered for meat and hides; they became a symbol of prosperity and wealth. The more cattle one owned, the more prosperous and powerful one was, and the more influential. Cattle could be exchanged for a variety of things. A young man, or an outsider looking for a secure home, would work for a cattle owner in the expectation that one day they might be given cattle of their own in exchange for their labour. Marriage was only possible if bride wealth (*lobola/bogadi*) was paid. The family of the groom would give cattle



Remains of a precolonial stone-walled complex at Blaauwboschkraal near Waterval Boven.



Overleaf: Extensive stone-walled settlements on the Mpumalanga escarpment south of Machadodorp.







Stone-walled homesteads
on the Mpumalanga
escarpment; homestead
patterns engraved in rocks
at Boomplaats, outside
Lydenburg.

to the family of his chosen wife. This transaction was seen as an exchange for the productivity and fertility the groom would gain from his wife. Cattle symbolised the wealth of men, and of society as a whole. Chiefs kept the most cattle, partly to signify their status, and partly as a store of wealth for the whole community.

These communities were ruled by chiefs, who played a central role in precolonial African society. They distributed land and cattle to their subjects, settled internal conflicts, and managed the external relations of their communities. They ruled with the help of trusted councillors and headmen, but the form of government was a participatory one, and there were forums for discussion and debate for males as well. Women were generally excluded from politics, although some women of royal families became queens or regents. As noted earlier, these societies were often ethnically mixed, and people owed their allegiance and loyalty not to the people of their birth but to the chief under whom they now lived. People of different ethnicities enjoyed the same rights as those born into a particular community. They could even become highly placed headmen or councillors, perhaps as representatives of an allied chiefdom.

Chiefs, together with herbalists or diviners, were responsible for ensuring that important rituals and ceremonies were conducted; ensuring that the rains came; and keeping the ancestors content and occasionally placating their wrath. Witchcraft was a matter of great concern. While healers, herbalists or diviners used medicines and rituals to heal people and bring good fortune, it was believed that witches used medicines and magic to bring misfortune to an individual, or to society as a whole.

Trade boomed in this period. Many people undertook both short and epic journeys, across unexplored terrain, or along well-known trade routes. In particular, the trade in ivory grew stronger as its value increased between the 1500s and 1800s driven by growing demand in Europe, Asia and America. Locally, people traded metal, salt, thatch, poles, cattle and grain. But the world was expanding, and goods could be traded for objects from places as far away as Venice. Copper, tin, ivory, furs, and rhino horns produced locally were exchanged for cloth, glass beads, and other European goods. To reach these prized objects, traders would journey from Phalaborwa in the north or Polokwane and Rooiberg in the north west, across the Sabie/Lydenburg area, through the Lebombo mountains at the Sabie or Matala poorts, and then on to Delagoa Bay where the Portuguese had set up a trade post.

The trade in ochre was also very popular, as ochre was used to tan hides, prepare skins, and give colour to painting. Women used red ochre



Ostrich shell beads;
Zulu Izindondo (brass necklace).



as a cosmetic. Accounts from the early 20th century mention that women would travel in groups from places as far away as Portuguese East Africa to the quarries in Malelane, Three Sisters and Hectorspruit. There they would each buy a load of ore for a shilling apiece, and carry the heavy bundles back home. Some societies engaging in trade, and in war, grew larger and stronger over time. By the end of the 18th century the antecedents of most contemporary ethnic groups in the region had settled in the area and merged with pre-existing groups. By the last decades of the 18th century a number of powerful chiefdoms, including the Pedi, Swazi, Ndebele and Ndwandwe chiefdoms, had emerged in the wider region out of a long history of interaction and competition.

Turbulent times

In the early 19th century change accelerated greatly in the region. The early to mid-19th century was a period of great turmoil and violence, caused by colonial expansion and the growth and expansion of certain African kingdoms. This was a period of rapid political change. Some chiefdoms and kingdoms grew stronger, while others were shattered, and the surviving members incorporated into the victorious societies. Even the BaKoni, who had built such impressive settlements of stone on the highveld escarpment, were destroyed by stronger enemies. By the 1830s, some communities had managed to re-establish themselves; however, they had little respite from risk. It soon became plain that the Boers who settled in the region from the 1840s onwards presented a daunting and dangerous new challenge to their autonomy.

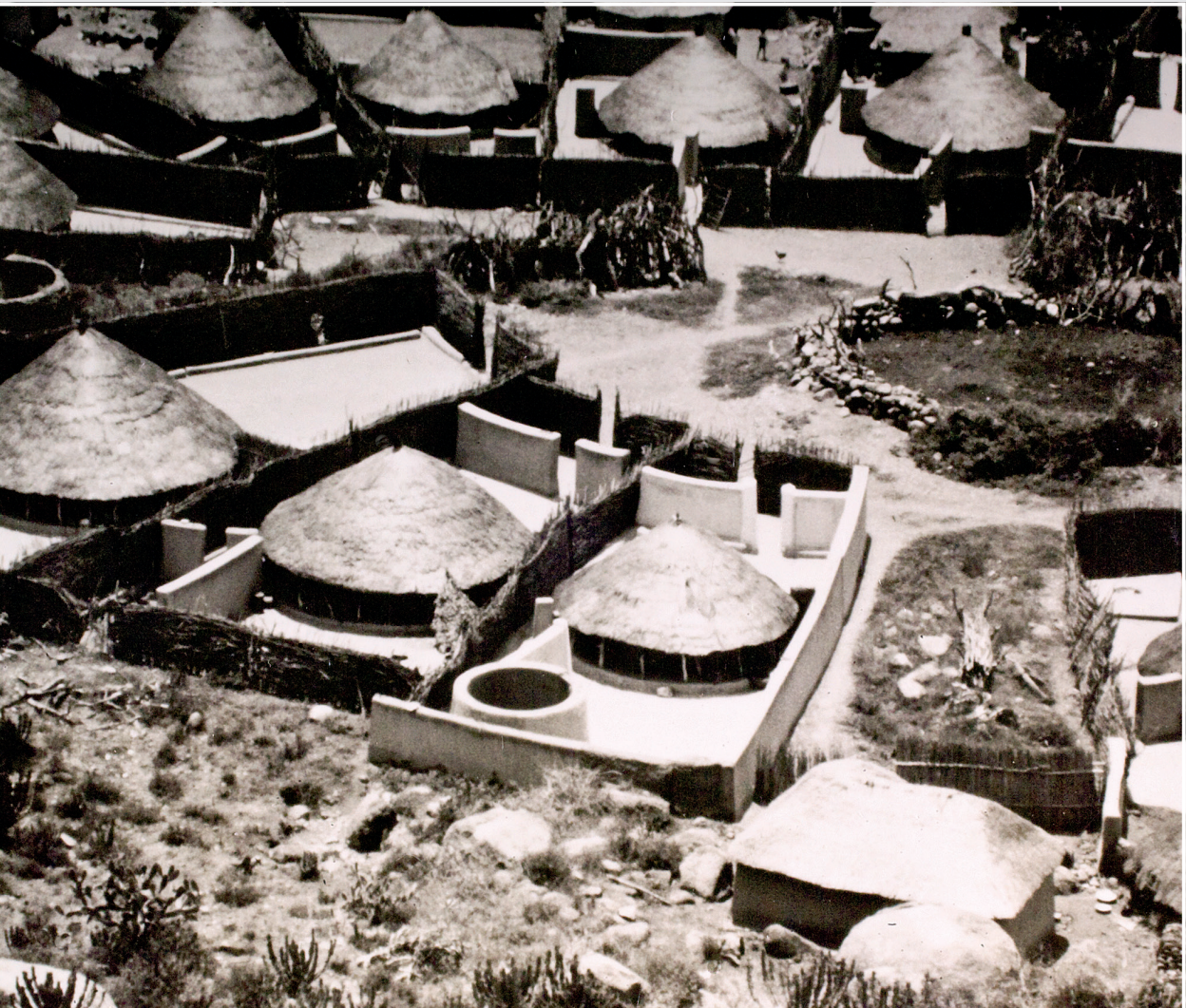


This and facing page: Trade beads, probably made in Venice, excavated at KwaMaza, a Ndzundza Ndebele site in the Steelpoort River Valley inhabited from the 1670s to the 1820s.

Settlements

In the late 19th and early 20th century, precolonial building styles and patterns of settlement still occurred throughout rural Transvaal, and some were photographed by anthropologists and others with an interest in indigenous history and cultures. Some of these images have been preserved, and provide a fascinating insight into the built environments and ways of life of precolonial societies.

A Pedi village.





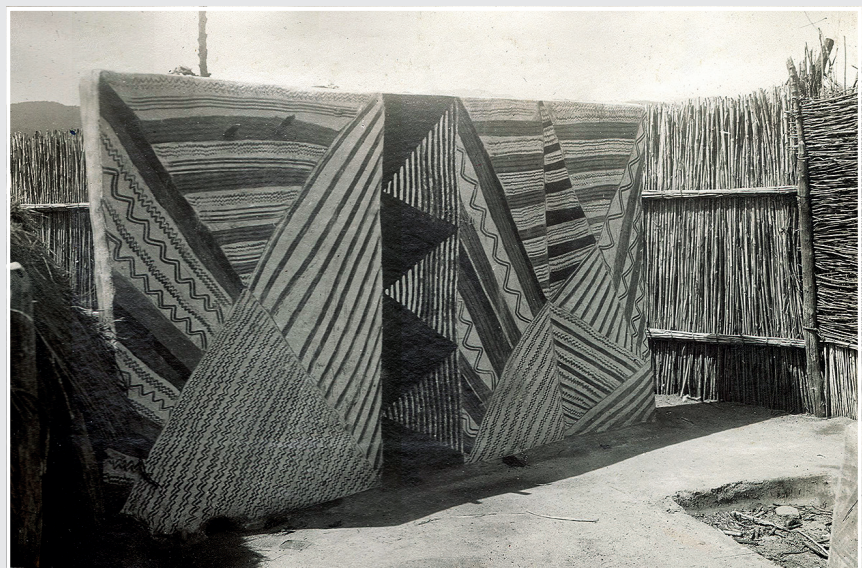
Pedi grain store, photographed by Alfred Duggan-Cronin in the early 20th century.

A Pedi hut in a decorated lapa.

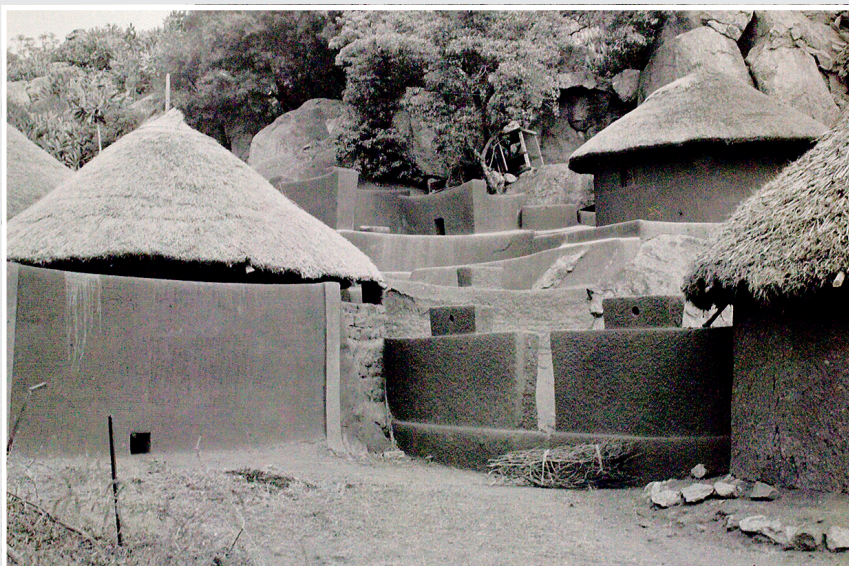




Swazi settlement,
photographed by Hilda
Kuper in the early
20th century.



Ndebele mural art,
photographed by Alfred
Duggan-Cronin in the
early 20th century.



'Arkone's kraal', a settlement on the Steelpoort River.

A Pedi mountain settlement.