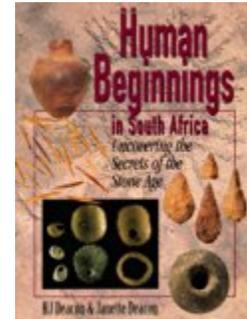


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

H. J. Deacon, Janette Deacon. *Human Beginnings in South Africa: Uncovering the Secrets of the Stone Age*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999. viii + 214 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7619-9086-4.

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Hilary and Janette Deacon have practiced archaeology in South Africa for more than three decades. Their book is both biography and narrative. Because of the breadth of their experience and research, they are able to marshal case studies from their own publications and archives that stand for more than two million years of the region's earliest history. In consequence, *Human Beginnings in South Africa* is a rich source of information, a readable account, and the latest in a series of books on South Africa's Stone Age that began with Goodwin and Van Riet Lowe's 1929 publication, *Stone Age Cultures of South Africa*.

*Human Beginnings* is dedicated to the /Xam San of southern Africa, and to Qing [1], some of whose knowledge about the subcontinent's precolonial past was recorded by magistrate J.M. Orpen in 1870. Qing referred to secrets that could only be known by the initiated. The authors' intention is to reveal these secrets in a different way, from the stone tools, living sites, rock paintings and other archaeological evidence largely ignored by "an affluent society that has trivialized the past" (p. 3).

This revelation begins with chapters on past environments and primate ancestry. These are difficult topics with their own complex terminology—the mark of the initiates of contemporary science. The authors do a good job of making this information accessible, and of setting a foundation for the subsequent consideration of human history. Their style is eclectic. In places, they are homely. In making the case for primate ancestry, for example, we are taken on a trip to the local zoo with a junior undergraduate class, asked why we look like chimpanzees, and told how Phillip, a student at Stellenbosch University where both authors have taught, found

a nearly-dead bushbaby on his doorstep and nurtured it back to health. But within a few pages the language is formidable, describing the importance of isotopic ratios in fossil speleothems, sea level changes and thermoluminescence dating.

*Human Beginnings* finds a more steady level in the chapters that follow. After a lengthy and authoritative summary of the human fossil evidence (made complex by the paucity of evidence and the volatility of palaeontological systems of classification), the authors move to the kernel of the book—four chapters that cover the emergence of modern people, the material culture of the Later Stone Age, the ethnographic basis for archaeological interpretations of this evidence, and art and religious beliefs. Here, biography and narrative converge. By concentrating in particular on their own research in the Eastern Cape, and recounting the series of research questions that led them to choose particular research projects and excavate specific archaeological sites, Hilary and Janette Deacon write a history of the Later Stone Age that is also an account of two long and distinguished careers in science. Their credo—and the one that they advocate to their readers—is personal immersion in the riches of the evidence: "the reason why much of Stone Age history has remained a secret for so long is not that it may not be told or that it has not been told in other books, but rather that it has to be individually discovered. Because we are remote from the past, we have to find it and immerse ourselves in it, if we wish to understand it and unlock its secrets. Pursuing the past is rewarding, and we hope it is a challenge more will follow" (p. 8).

What, then, motivates this personalized journey of exploration? Deacon and Deacon nod to the diver-

sity of approaches that have characterized archaeological practice since the 1960s, and acknowledge the “post-processual” movement, forged in opposition to truth claims and the search for general laws of human behaviour. But theirs is in essence a positivist archaeology—the formulation of hypotheses about the past, the rigorous testing of these hypotheses and the formulation of more general statements on this basis. This is evident, for example, in their interpretation of the depopulation of parts of southern Africa 6000 years ago when temperatures were some 2 degrees C higher than the present. This is taken as a predictor for the future effects of global warming and an indicator of the value of a utilitarian archaeology: “the future can only be predicted by knowing the past” (p. 29). More generally, the authors conclude that environmental changes are the prime movers of human history: “the population history of South Africa, as understood from the archaeological record, is one of expansions and contractions that are related to environmental conditions” (p. 29). The consequence is a starkly determinist definition of humanity: “Humans are large-bodied, ground-living, general feeders who have invaded all available habitats on the earth” (p. 10).

But can the study of the past—any study of the past—be based on a Baconian concept of experimental science? Good science can of course be invoked to deepen and strengthen historical interpretations—and *Human Beginnings* is full of excellent examples of such archaeological science. But is this history writing? Although Deacon and Deacon suggest in places that it is, their own odyssey suggests the contrary. Theirs is a thoroughly hermeneutic reading of South Africa’s past that moves effortlessly between their own decisions about where and how to dig, the results of their excavations, and the diverse sources of evidence that they have been able to find to give meaning to this material. When they write that “theory is part of the romance of archaeology and is vital is we want to breathe some life into the snippets of information drawn from stone and other artifacts” (p. 161), they do not seem to have followed the logical positivism of laboratory technique, but rather a process of bricolage.

This is evident in the use of ethnography in *Human Beginnings*. Reading the distant past through the lens of the present and the documents of more recent history is the Rosetta Stone of the Deacons’ methodology: “Stone Age archaeologists often fantasise about traveling back in a time machine to observe the people who lived at the site they are excavating. The next best thing is ethnoarchaeology, even if all you can do is read about what other

people have done. You also learn a lot by trying your hand at making stone artifacts, cooking for 30 students over an open fire, lying awake in a leaky tent through a stormy night, and gathering your food from the veld” (p. 128). The authors see this as a distinct sort of history-writing: “Historical accounts are usually based on a sequence of events that took place and on the motives and actions of the people involved. Archaeological sequences are different. They do not describe events in the same way as historical accounts because archaeological methods are ill equipped to isolate and therefore to recognize individual people, actions and events the best source of information from which to construct an archaeological history of the San and Khoekhoen is drawn from Khoisan ethnography.” (p. 130). Deacon and Deacon make use of this approach to the full. Ethnography is used to good effect in interpreting the archaeological traces of the Middle Stone Age, for example in interpreting the remains of marula nuts found in Middle Stone Age sites, or in inferring “fire farming” - the planned increase of the productivity of plant foods. And ethnography is the key to interpreting the Later Stone Age. These chapters in *Human Beginnings* are a systematic and convincing interpretation of more than 10,000 years of history through the skillful integration of archaeological information, nineteenth century San accounts of their lives, and anthropological fieldwork in Botswana and Namibia in the 1950s and 1980s.

But there seems to be an underlying uncertainty on the part of the authors about the success of their own approach to putting this grand narrative together. In introducing one chapter, they recall a memorable event in 1979, when they provided the delegates to a conference of the Southern African Association of Archaeologists to a dinner of indigenous foods (an event well remembered by this reviewer). But were those environmental scientists and revisionist historians really comfortable in each other’s company? Does the invocation of Marx’s concept of the mode of production to account for the origins of herding in southern Africa in Chapter 10 sit comfortably with the environmental determinism of Chapter 2? These fault lines mirror those of archaeology as a whole, and the still-unresolved fracturing of the discipline from the 1960s onwards. By not bringing this contradiction out into the open, the authors weaken their book in quite specific ways.

This is most evident in the treatment of race in *Human Beginnings*. “Race” does not appear in the index (itself extraordinary in a book about the pursuit of knowledge and its social consequences in South Africa over the past

150 years). The concept of race is never defined (despite the fact that it is still extensively used by human biologists), although at one point it is sternly dismissed from the stage: there is a “biological unity of humankind”, “in general all living humans are remarkably alike”, and “this unity is not generally appreciated and it makes nonsense of perceived differences of race and ethnicity...” (pp. 88-89).

This is a cul-de-sac for the Deacons’ argument, because their argument requires evidence from both physical anthropology and ethnography, and evidence from both sources is imbued with “perceived differences of race and ethnicity”. So we are told, without qualifying comment, that “peoples living in the regions of the hot savanna climates tend to have a tall, slender build as this biotype aids dissipation of heat, while those living in high latitudes tend to have stout bodies and short arms and legs because their biotype conserves body heat. In the same way the melanin of darker skins in the tropics gives better protection against the sun’s ultraviolet rays...” (88). Because the authors have avoided the topic of race, they are not able to draw the distinction between interpretations that rest on the polyvalent distribution of genetic frequencies (that may account for the origins of such physical attributes as body shapes and skin pigmentation) and essentialist theories of race. They get into further difficulties in explaining the difference between the two competing theories for the origins of modern people because one of these theories, the “multi-regional hypothesis”, does indeed argue that modern biological variability is founded in human evolutionary history - an interpretation that has led to accusations of racism. And, in expanding on their preferred hypothesis for modern human origins, the “recent African origins” model, which traces the genetic inheritance of all modern humans to an ancestral African population of between 1000 and 10,000 people, living about 200,000 years ago, Deacon and Deacon themselves depend for evidence on the “different evolutionary histories of Khoisan, Negroid and Pygmy populations” - differences that can be traced and quantified through the genetic makeup of these groups today. This is advocated as a research agenda: “San,

Khoekhoe and other ethnically differentiated groups in southern Africa carry in their genes a history that can be unraveled through genetic studies, and this must become a priority for future research” (p. 93).

Why this reticence about discussing race? It is perhaps because race is inseparable from politics and politics, in the archaeology-as-science paradigm, is antithetical to sound explanation and rigorous scholarship. The absence of political context is a constant shadow. *Human Beginnings* itself begins with a history of archaeological research in South Africa, starting with Thomas Holden Bowker’s collections of stone tools in the 1850s, continuing with the great men of human palaeontology - Dart, Broom, Leakey, Tobias - and leading, as a progressive narrative of discovery and ever-deepening interpretation, to the diversity of present-day research. But there is another history, the history of an archaeology that was molded by colonialism and shackled by apartheid, with the consequence that almost all of the South African authorities that contribute to this understanding are white. This is a history that saw the initial unity of archaeological practice in Africa broken by the white nationalist government in 1948, when it was made clear that the second Pan-African Congress would not be welcome to meet in Johannesburg, and which saw the Southern African Association of Archaeologists divided in 1983, when South African archaeologists (and U.S. archaeologists working in South Africa) declined to pass a motion condemning apartheid on the grounds that this would be political interference in scientific practice. A true homage to Qing should acknowledge that his descendants are not to be found among the initiates of the new millennium and describe, at least to some extent, what is being done to forge a more inclusive sense of the past. And Hilary and Janette Deacon’s goal of an inclusive appreciation of the value of the past is not likely to be fully achieved unless archaeology’s own skeletons are dusted off and interrogated.

#### Note

[1]. Qing: one of the few nineteenth century San whose views have been recorded.

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