

## To find the unknown past

MARTIN LEGASSICK

What happened in southern Africa's unknown Iron Age—in the 1,000 years up to 1800? If the gap is to be closed a new spirit of research and new techniques are essential.

FOR ALL HISTORIANS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA the period from 1795 to 1805 represents an important turning point in the history of the subcontinent. The alliance of chiefdoms formed by Dingiswayo around this time grew later under Shaka into the Zulu kingdom. Its creation and expansion duly led to the *Mfecane* and the dispersal of Nguni state-builders such as Mzilikazi, Soshangane and Zwangendaba, affecting almost every African community on the subcontinent. Meanwhile the British occupied the Cape Colony for the first time, in an initial manifestation of the "imperial presence" that was to lead before long to the Trek and eventually to the consolidation of white supremacy over the whole of southern Africa.

For those historians of southern Africa anxious to overturn traditional white historiography, the date 1800 is of importance too, for it divided two time periods with different methodological problems. After that date, and before 1859, literate persons had at least visited, and often begun to live in or near, almost every community south of the Limpopo. In their books, letters and journals can be found ethnographic notes and historical jottings which make it possible to sketch the broad outlines of the history back into the latter part of the eighteenth century, the limit of eye-witness accounts by their informants. Critical examination of the records of these informants, combined with the oral tradition of the communities, can compensate for their European ethno-centrism to give a fuller and more accurate picture.

In fact after 1800, and even more for the time since 1850, there are no intrinsic difficulties facing even the most staid documentary historian in giving a more balanced account of southern African history. That non-whites have until now entered into the history of the subcontinent as a "problem" of the dimensions of the weather, or of those mountains over which intrepid Voortrekkers were continually hauling their dismantled wagons, is a result of racism and wilful neglect rather than methodology. Fortunately a school of southern African

historians is emerging who view African societies as active entities, and who have discarded as sterile the debate as to whether the "native problem" has been well or badly solved and whether the missionaries or the settlers were the bad guys.

Before 1800 the picture is different. If we accept, for convenience, the boundary between prehistory and history as occurring at the start of the Iron Age (following the *Journal of African History*), then "history" south of the Limpopo began at some time between the fourth and eleventh centuries. The first of these dates is the earliest existing for the Rhodesian Iron Age, and the second is a radio-carbon dating (the earliest at present) for iron smelting furnaces in the Witwatersrand area. Generally, the Iron Age is associated with the arrival of Bantu-speaking peoples, though the presence of skeletons more akin to Khoi-Khoi at Mapungubwe shows that this was always so: diffusion could have advanced iron-working faster than migration, and the intermarriage of migrants with indigenous inhabitants is likely.

It is not necessary in this review to explode once more the hoary white supremacist myth about the "Bantu" streaming in across the Limpopo as Van Riebeeck was planting his flag in Table Bay. But the existing evidence suggests that the iron-workers, probably Bantu-speaking, were south of the Limpopo even earlier than Monica Wilson's 1959 *African Studies* article postulates. Gervase Mathew the archaeologist has, for example, found on river estuaries on the Pondoland coast fragments of Chinese porcelain, dating from pre-1600 times. Some of them, at least, are not from shipwrecks, and suggest trade with advanced Iron Age communities. In Basutoland and at Winburg pottery dated between AD330 and AD1450, has been found with similarities to Zimbabwe pottery.

But these, and others that could be cited, are isolated scraps of evidence. What is more important is the need for historians to sift and integrate what specialists in other fields have already discovered, and to stimulate research into what remains to be explored. To elucidate the history of southern Africa in the 800-1500 years before 1800 will require the full-scale application of all the techniques that historians

of the remainder of the continent are using. Among these can be listed:

1. **ARCHAEOLOGY.** Besides the famous sites such as Mapungubwe, much of the High Veld (in the Transvaal and parts of the Orange Free State) and Bechuanaland abounds with ancient stone dwellings, stone byres and walls, as well as mine-workings of various kinds. Some attention has been devoted to these, but even so R. Mason, in his 1962 *Prehistory of the Transvaal* could write "The wide extent of Iron Age settlement demands a scale of research at present beyond our capacity. Only one area has been examined on the necessary regional basis, but here our limited resources also proved unequal to the wealth of remains." A similar story holds for the O.F.S.-Basutoland sites (despite James Walton) and for the few known Iron Age sites east of the Drakensberg. Systematic mapping followed by excavation of all such sites is needed. Limited resources, whether financial or of manpower, can be overcome if the will prevails, and one can only surmise whether the concentration by archaeologists (as well as physical anthropologists) on the Stone Age at the expense of the Iron Age is the result of disinterest, racism, or the wilful antagonism of the South African government.

2. **PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY.** Human skeletal material, blood-group surveys and other such techniques have shed substantial though as yet tentative light on ethnic derivations of peoples of the Rhodesian Iron Age. Some study of the same sort has been done for peoples further south, but here again the brilliant minds of southern African physical anthropology have concentrated their efforts on the pre-Iron Age period.

3. **LINGUISTICS.** Very little of the extensive research on the Bantu languages has been historical. E. Westphal, in a July 1963 article in *Africa*, has given a seminal review of the state of knowledge about migrations of various southern African groups based partially on non-linguistic data. But his article, presenting conclusions

MARTIN LEGASSICK is a former Rhodes Scholar and a South African exile now working for a Ph.D. in African history at the University of California, Los Angeles.

necessarily related to ethnic type. Nevertheless, with imaginative scholarship and an open mind, hypotheses can be put forward based on the known and asking specific questions of the unknown: the work of D. P. Abraham on pre-colonial Rhodesia provides an example.

Relating the evidence from different disciplines is not the only problem. This would indeed give a description of events and processes, but chronology is a necessary insertion for the treatment of causality, the central problem for the historian. Here radio-carbon dating is of primary importance, especially where this can be related through tradition to the settlement sites of particular people (though place-names provide a formidable problem). There are other archaeological methods, and tentative linguistic dating processes. Lists of rulers and age-regiments, and genealogies, when used critically and compared among different societies, are another device for scientific dating. Nowhere in Africa but the East African interior is the problem of chronology more difficult than south of the Limpopo: until after 1800 there are *no* exact documented dates, however intermittent (with the possible exception of eclipses) to provide a base-line.

AT THIS STAGE it is almost presumptuous to make suggestions about the pre-1800 South African past. In the Sotho areas it can be presumed there were political communities falling apart and regrouping, moving from place to place, fighting and trading. They built in stone and worked iron, and probably, unlike the Nguni societies east of the Drakensberg which may have been later arrivals, were based more on a hunting-agriculture mixture than on a herding-agriculture combination. Almost certainly they had over their whole existence strong connections with the states between the Limpopo and the Zambezi, and probably they traded with the Arabs and later the Portuguese along the east coast. What we cannot as yet determine is whether processes of linear development can have taken place in isolation (as opposed to transformation through conquest or after external events) — processes such as growth in size and stratification which are familiar from elsewhere on the continent. Probably they did.

While Dingiswayo was amalgamating some chiefdoms, others seem to have been growing in the High-Veld-Bechuanaland area, among the Pedi and Ngwato for example. Perhaps we must search for the causes of the rise of the Zulu — the point with which this article began — in some factors of internal structure or external relations common to other southern African societies at this time. As yet there is no satisfactory explanation for the emergence of the Zulu under Shaka although it is one of the most important processes of post-1800 South African history: this is one reason among many for the study of the history of southern Africa before 1800. ●

rather than the evidence for them, needs to be revalued and further tested: there is much unexploited linguistic material to use for this purpose. He postulates for the earliest Sotho groups an entry into the present South Africa well before AD1600 — along an east coast route, surprisingly enough, which pattern, as he points out, does not accord with the linguistically-derived Sotho centre of dispersal, which is in the Harts-Molopo watershed region. Some Nguni also entered along this route, and others across the mid-Limpopo. New study, using linguistic evidence as it is being used elsewhere in Africa (by Greenberg for example) could give much information on migration routes, relationships of descent between groups, and trade contacts.

4. ORAL TRADITION. The detailed work for the first three fields of discussion must of necessity be done by specialists; historians can only take their results to incorporate or reject. Most of the evidence provided by these fields is, too, very general in nature, dealing with groups defined ethnically or linguistically or in terms of cultural artefacts, rather than politically as the historian would like. Generally the information from these fields becomes progressively more valuable as one moves back in time, and generally it describes facts about whole communities only. Oral tradition is different. It can be — and has been elsewhere in Africa — collected by historians. It is concerned with political communities and often with conflicts within them, and it is often more useful for more recent periods. This is not primarily because events more distant in time are more easily forgotten — for Vansina has pointed out that the reliability of oral tradition has more to do with the ways in which it is transmitted than with the antiquity of the events described. Oral tradition is less useful in dealing with distant events because they are more easily falsified for socio-political purposes. Furthermore, acculturation processes in southern Africa are rapidly breaking down the means of transmission. This means that the most valuable task that historians in South Africa can presently perform is the systematic collection of oral traditions from every African society, and from every

relevant subgroup in that society. (For, as examples elsewhere in Africa show, traditions collected from the ruling dynasty alone are liable, as we would expect, to be highly biased). Some compilations have already been made for southern Africa. Besides the classic works of Ellenberger for the southern Sotho and Bryant for the northern Nguni, there is a great deal of oral tradition collected by amateur and professional anthropologists. Isaac Schapera and P. Breutz in particular have recorded valuable material on the Tswana in the Protectorate and in the Republic. Ironically Breutz, working for the Department of Bantu Administration and Development ethnographic survey, is in complete conflict with official South African historiography and indeed with his employers' propaganda about their forbears having come to settle an empty land. For he has recorded Tswana genealogies and in some cases settlement areas south of the Limpopo (and not even in the Protectorate!) well back into the thirteenth century. Unfortunately much of this recorded tradition fails to mention the names and social status of African informants, and often incorporates written evidence into the record without documentation of this. Much will have to be collected afresh, and will hopefully benefit from books such as Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition*, recently translated from the French [see *The New African*, September 1965], which discusses both the collection and the internal criticism of the tradition.

THESE FOUR DISCIPLINES, and others more esoteric that historians of Africa are using — notably, perhaps, the history of climate and physical environment, and the history of food crops — will provide the basic source material for southern African history of the last thousand years. The evaluation and interpretation of the evidence will be difficult, and will require much more communication between specialists in the disciplines than has hitherto taken place. One major problem has already been mentioned: the different units to which the different source fields relate. Archaeologists are reluctant to associate particular peoples with particular "cultures"; linguists point out that language can be transmitted by conquest, intermarriage and absorption, and is not