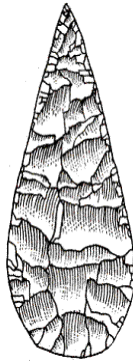


The image is a collage of prehistoric artifacts. The top left shows several stone arrowheads of various shapes and colors (brown, tan, white). The top right is a close-up of a flint core with a grid-like pattern. The middle left shows a collection of stone flakes and cores. The middle right shows several long, thin bone spears. The bottom left shows several large, rounded stone or bone objects with holes. The bottom right shows more bone spears of varying lengths and thicknesses.

# Overview of our Prehistory

by  
**Reon Meij**

**Hessequa Society for Archaeology**



**HESSEQUA SOCIETY FOR ARCHAEOLOGY**

**OVERVIEW OF OUR PREHISTORY**

By Reon Meij

Stilbaai 2010

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# OVERVIEW OF OUR PREHISTORY

. This book was written by Reon Meij under the auspices of the Hessequa Society for Archaeology.



Reon Meij

# 1. Overview of our prehistory

Human beings have been living on the Southern Cape coast for more than a million years. Prehistory tells us more about the people who lived here when there was nobody around to record their history.



To find out more about how these people lived, one has to make deductions by investigating the still surviving objects they had made and left behind. Examples of these are artefacts like stone implements and potsherds found in bygone living quarters or rubbish heaps and sometimes, with luck, perhaps even an object of art such as a rock painting or a story told by a descendant.

The prehistory of South Africa can be divided into four periods that altogether span some 2½ million years:

- the **Earlier Stone Age (ESA)**: ± 2½ million to 250 000 yrs ago;
- the **Middle Stone Age**: ± 250 000 to 25 000 yrs ago;
- the **Later Stone Age (LSA)**: ± 25 000 to as recently as a few years ago;
- the **Iron Age** (since ± 2 000 BP)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The above classification and terminology applies to the South African Stone Age only. It differs from terminology used in international literature to denote Stone Age sequences elsewhere, eg in Europe, in respect of which the terms Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze and Iron Ages are generally used.

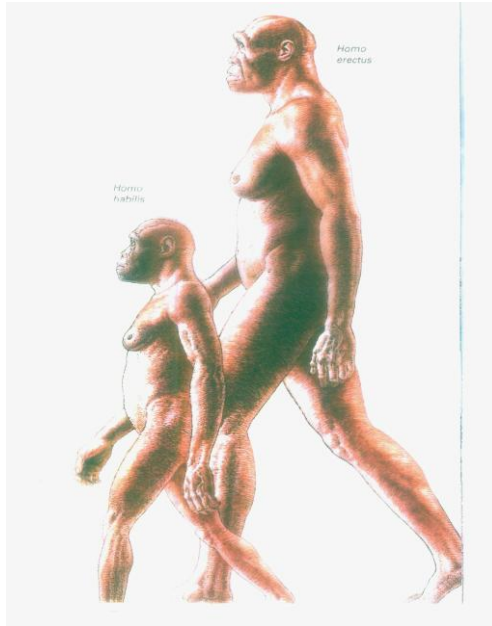
## 2. The Earlier Stone Age (ESA)

The ESA dates back more than 2 million years into human history. It ends roughly with the advent of the Middle Stone Age (MSA)  $\pm$  250 000 years ago. At first there were no humans (*Homo sapiens*) as we know them today, but primitive beings with mostly apelike but some humanlike features such as an upright stance, hands with apposition-able thumbs and the skill to make and use artefacts. Initially they made only simple bone or wooden clubs, sharpened sticks or primitive stone choppers. Over many millennia this skill gradually became more sophisticated and by the latter part of the ESA ( $\pm$  500 000 yrs ago) it had evolved into the ability to shape neatly-finished stone artefacts, mostly approximately the size of a man's hand.

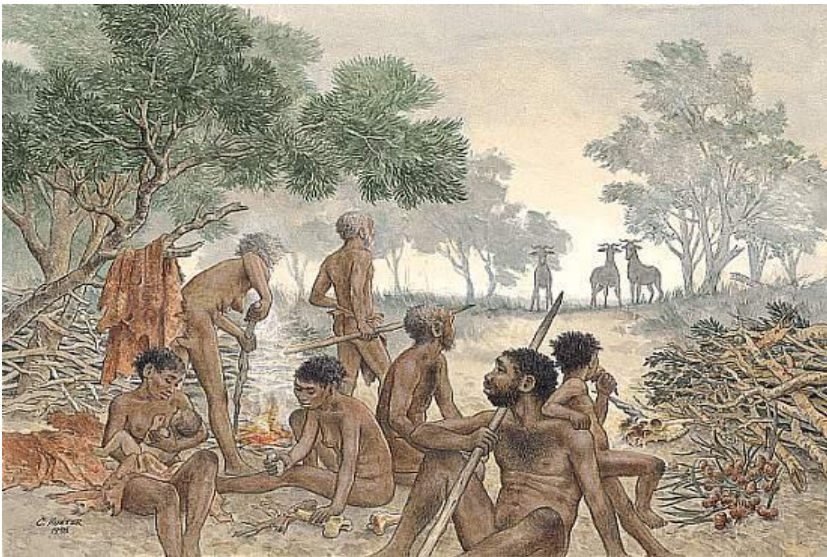
The most common (but not the only) implement used for close to a million years, was the almond-shaped "hand axe". Although archaeologists are unsure about the precise function of this tool, it was most probably a multi-purpose tool used for chopping, digging, cutting, scraping, etc. The almond shape of this tool was the result of flakes being removed from both sides of a core (such as a pebble) by well-aimed blows with a "hammer stone". By the end of the ESA and beginning of the MSA a wide variety of tools such as hand axes, cleavers, scrapers and points were being manufactured from a variety of materials such as tone, bone, wood and other natural materials.



***Almond-shaped hand axe***



***Homo Habilis and Homo Erectus – pre Homo Sapiens***

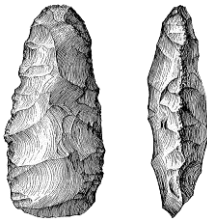


***Earlier Stone Age People***



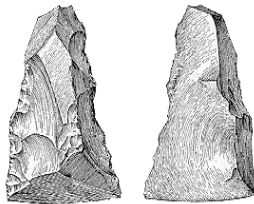
Examples of artefacts dating back to the beginning of the ESA are scarce and not always easily recognisable as such; and the ones that have survived the ravages of time are mostly stone artefacts. Some excellent examples, however, are on view in most reputable museums. Although the immediate Stilbaai area is not well-known for its ESA finds, many ESA artefacts have been found here and in the broader Hessequa region. Several excellent examples are displayed in the Versfeld House, Riversdale, as well as in the Blombos Museum of Archeology which is situated in accommodation made available by the Stilbaai Tourism Bureau in the historic De Jagerhuis at “Die Palinggat”.

**Hand Axe**



**Front view Side view**

**Cleaver**



**Back Front**

Based on these finds and research on similar finds in Southern Africa, we can get a reasonable picture of how these people lived and evolved. Analysis of the sites where these proto-humans lived reveals that they lived on small animals, birds, insects and sometimes bigger game which they had either trapped or scavenged from other animals of prey. The remains of hearths (fire-places) also indicate that, while being able to use fire, *Homo erectus* probably could not yet make fire.

**Possible uses of ESA artefacts**



**Cut**



**Break**



**Chop**



**Skin**

### 3. The Middle Stone Age (MSA)<sup>2</sup>

Stilbaai is renowned among archaeologists for the stone implements, particularly from the MSA, found here. About 250 000 years ago, at the **end of the Early Stone Age** and the **beginning of the Middle Stone Age**, people like us, *Homo sapiens*, (Homo = human; sapiens = wise/intelligent; thus: the intelligent human) appeared on the scene of prehistory. These people were hunter-gatherers who not only collected a great variety of food from the *veld* but also lived on small mammals like hyrax (*dassies*), moles, birds, small deer and reptiles. At the coast, fish and other sea food like mussels and abalone also formed part of their diet. Their stone implements were no longer made only from cores but from flakes that were deliberately struck from cores.

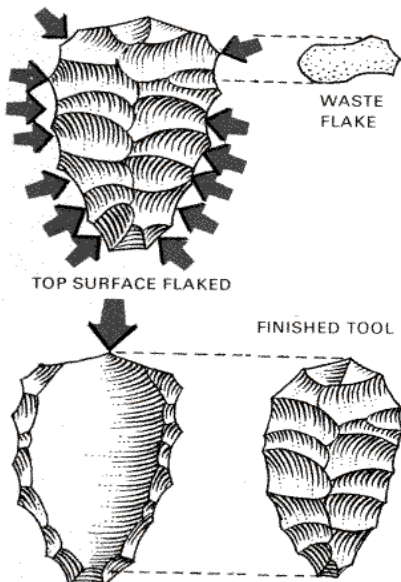
Furthermore, they could predetermine the shape of such eventual flakes by the preparatory and planned removal of initial flakes from the core. Depending on the manner in which the core had been prepared, flakes with a blade-like form, a triangular point, or a near-oval form could be obtained as illustrated below.



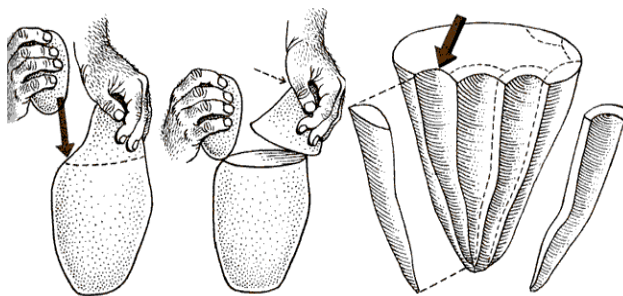
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<sup>2</sup> Stilbaai is internationally known amongst archaeologists for its stone implements from the MSA. In particular, “The Stillbay” refers to one of the stone implement craft variations of the Middle Stone Age. It is particularly well-known for exquisitely crafted leaf-shaped bifacial points. Typically this is a long symmetrical leaf-shaped point, thin in cross-section. The whole surface has been worked by fine flaking, known as fish-scale flaking, achieved by pressing rather than knocking off little trimming flakes. The finest examples are comparable to any produced in the Solutrean of the Upper Paleolithic in Europe. Initially the term “Stillbay Industry” was coined by AJH Goodwin, doyen of South African archeology, as a tribute to the pioneering archaeological work done in the Stillbay/Blombos/Riversdale area by the Riversdale schoolmaster CHTD Heese

**Preparation of core to eventually remove oval shaped flake**

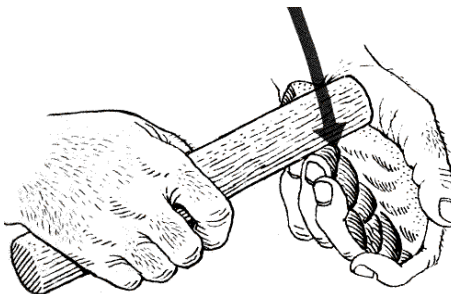
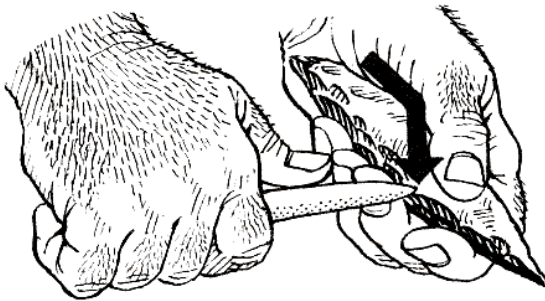


**Prepared core technique**



**Blade technique**

Flakes thus removed could be used as is, e.g. if it had a sharp edge, it could be used as a cutting tool. By the **end of the Middle Stone Age**, flakes were often retouched by the secondary removal of smaller flakes (**pressure flaking**), rendering serrated edges for cutting or blunted edges for scraping. These *changes in technology* led to artefacts gradually becoming smaller, more refined and often retouched on both sides (e.g. bifacial points). They have left us some of the most beautifully worked implements, including points, scrapers, blades and even small hand axes and cleavers. They had also mastered the art of mounting stone tools on wooden spears or handles (**hafting**). An interesting phenomenon is that some of the most exquisitely worked artefacts bear virtually no sign of having been used. Were these made purely for aesthetic or ritualistic purposes (e.g. as ritual knife) or perhaps even to be used as “money”?



***Pressure flaking with a piece of bone or wood***

At this stage implements were also manufactured from a wide variety of other materials such as wood, bone, furs and skins, fish bone, marine and riverine shells, ostrich egg shell, tortoise shell and ochre.

Unfortunately much of the remaining materials of the culture of these early humans, has been ravaged by decay, especially at open sites such as shell middens. Stone implements have best withstood the tooth of time.

In caves, the circumstances for the preservation of not only stone and ochre, but also bone, shell and even plant matter such as wood and pollen, are more favourable. This is particularly true for Blombos Cave, close to Stilbaai, where the calciferous inner walls of the cave have limited decay, preserving things as if in a time capsule. In the different layers of occupation of this cave, archaeologists found not only stone artefacts, but also bone, wood and clay implements, remains of food (e.g. bones of small animals, birds and fish, shells and plants) and even some human teeth. Through meticulous excavations and scientific analyses, various aspects of the livelihood and cultures of these people could be dated and reconstructed. In the Southern Cape coastal and adjacent regions several such sites have been located and thoroughly researched. The findings regarding the MST people of this region may be summarised as follows:

- The people of this era were mainly **hunter-gatherers**. They probably were experts at **veld craft**, tracking, trapping, etc.
  - \* They gathered a wide range of **veldkos** (wild edible plants, bulbs, fruit, berries, eggs, insects, etc.)
  - \* They also hunted **small game** like the rock hyrax, moles, rabbits, birds, antelope, reptiles, etc.
  - \* They fished and gathered **seafood**, e.g. mussels and periwinkle.
- The remains of ash found in the caves is an indication that they used fire but it is not clear when they actually started making fire. Based on the presence of hearths at several MSA sites, they had probably mastered the art of making **fire** towards the end of the MSA.
- They also used **other materials** such as wood, bone, horn, shell, reed, skin, gut, etc. for the manufacturing of artefacts. Natural containers such as calabashes (gourds) and ostrich eggs were used to store water. Hollow stones were possibly used for cooking, but apparently pottery was not yet practised

Discoveries at Blombos Cave near Stilbaai indicate that 75 000 years ago these people were also taking the first steps towards practising **art**:

- many pieces of ochre (haematite), imported from elsewhere, were found in the MSA layers. Traditional societies use ochre as a colouring agent for adorning their bodies or for painting as well as in rituals such as burials. Archaeologists regard the presence of ochre as an indicator of possible ritualistic behaviour. Furthermore, two pieces of ochre that were found had been deliberately engraved with patterns, indicating cognitive intent, if not the practice of art.
- Thirty nine tick shell beads (*Nassarius kraussianus*), deliberately perforated to enable them to be strung as decorative beads, were recovered from Blombos Cave. This clearly indicates a propensity for symbolic and aesthetic thought.



**Artefacts from Blombos Cave:  
Stillbay points, engraved ochre and bone tools**

## 4. The Later Stone Age (LSA)

From approximately 30 000 to 25 000 years ago, the Middle Stone Age technology was replaced by a series of enhancements introducing the Later Stone Age. These include:

- **Microliths**, i.e. generally smaller and even more specialised stone implements than in the MSA. The people of the LSA were skilled at making stone tools. However, while flakes were at times beautifully retouched, sharp-edged flakes would often be used as is, without retouching. Microliths were used for cutting, scraping, boring (through wood or shell) and engraving (on stone or wood). Until recently the San (Bushmen) still used microliths for these purposes.
- The manufacturing of **composite tools**, e.g. where several flakes were mounted onto a wooden spear to form a harpoon or a sickle.
- Bored rocks, mostly used as weights on digging sticks.
- Polished bone, horn or shell implements, e.g. needles, awls and arrow points.
- **Wooden artefacts**, e.g. spears, digging sticks, fire-kindling sticks.
- The **bow and arrow** (since  $\pm 10\ 000$  years ago).
- **Reed** artefacts, e.g. arrows, flutes.
- **Fishing implements**, e.g. bone hooks and stone sinkers.
- **Containers** made of ostrich egg, tortoise carapace, skin and un-baked clay (baked clay ware only since  $\pm 2\ 000$  yrs ago).
- Primitive **plait-work**, e.g. ropes made of grass.
- Decorative **beadwork** using ostrich shell, nuts, pips and kernels and, later, glass and metal through contact with Bantu and Europeans.
- The use of **ochre** as a colouring and ritual agent, e.g. at burial sites.
- Processed **animal skin** karosses and clothing
- **Decorative paintings and engravings** on bone and stone, ostrich egg shells and rocks.
- **Graves and human skeletons** that link the *Strandlopers* to both the San and the Khoi.



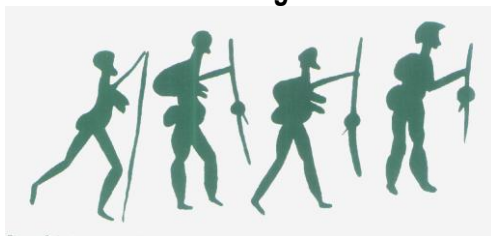
***San hunter***



***Composite tools***



***San kindling a fire***



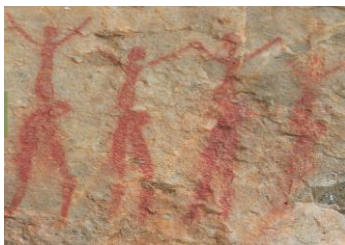
***San women with digging sticks***

In the Stilbaai area there is ample evidence of the LSA. Amateur archaeologists regularly find LSA stone artefacts on the dunes to the west of Stillbay. (These must be left as they are, as no stone implements may be disturbed without the permission of SAHRA, ***The South African Heritage Resources Agency.***)



LSA artefacts are spread out over a large area along the coastline from the Duivenhoks River to the Gouritz; some in shell middens, others in caves or rock shelters and others simply lying around on the dunes. Ongoing excavations at Blombos Cave by professor Chris Henshilwood and his team of students, have exposed valuable information on, not only the MSA, but also the LSA. In fact, the legacy of the LSA abounds in the wider Hessequa area, *inter alia*:

- The tidal fish traps at Stilbaai are the most visible and unique legacy of a technology of which the roots date back to the Stone Age. A few of these stone traps date back to the Stone Age but most were built as recently as a few years ago. The traps are still maintained by a few local enthusiasts. When the Portuguese landed here in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they witnessed traps being used by the Khoi, as did some of the first white colonists who settled in this part of the country.
- The many shell middens found along the beaches in this area bear visible evidence of the Stone Age. They contain the remains of mussels, periwinkles, oysters, fish, etc., which comprised much of the diet of the *Strandloper* people. They were hunter-gatherers with an omnivorous diet (i.e. they also lived off meat and plant material or *veldkos*) as is evident from the remains of hyrax, small deer, hare, snakes, birds and other small game found at sites such as the Blombos Cave.
- In the nearby Langeberg Mountains, San rock paintings also abound.



### ***The Dancing Ladies***

(Rock painting from the Langeberg mountain range)



***Tidal Fish Traps at Stilbaai***

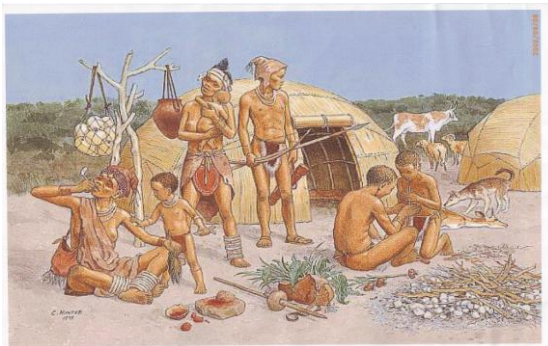


***Shell Midden***

## 5. Transition from prehistory to history

For thousands of years prior to the arrival of white colonists, small groups of San hunter-gatherers were spread throughout Southern Africa. Their typical LSA lifestyle enabled them to live successfully, even in the wettest or driest areas of the subcontinent.

About 2 000 years ago nomadic groups of pastoralists (herders) from the north started settling as far south as the area known today as the Southern Cape. These people were the Khoi, a group that was closely related to the San. Although they had their own language and pastoral culture, they retained many elements of the hunter-gatherer past that they shared with the San. There were also many significant similarities in the languages (of which there were many dialects) of the San and the Khoi. More or less 2 000 years ago the nomadic Khoi brought sheep to this area and eventually also cattle and goats. They settled mainly in the wetter coastal and adjacent areas where enough water and grazing for their live stock was available.



***Traditional Khoi Family***

The San and the Khoi initially maintained their own identity. Over time, however, they started to intermingle. By the time Western historians arrived here, they often could not distinguish between the San and the Khoi, due to their bodily similarities. To the untrained ear, their languages also sounded similar; the life style of the San was much the same as that of the Khoi (which

also had elements of hunter-gatherer) and some San people started keeping livestock.

However, some Sangroups that moved out to the Kalahari until recently maintained their hunter-gatherer life style.

Certain descendants of the Khoi and the San recently started referring to themselves as the “Khoisan”. The herders initially referred to themselves as Khoi (variants:Khoi-Khoin, Khoin-Khoin and Khoekhoen) and to the San as San (also “Sonqua”, and “Obiqua”). The 17th century colonists referred to the Khoi as “Hottentots” and to the San as “Boesmans/Bushmen”. They often confused these two with oneanother, though. Initially these terms referred to the difference in life style. By the19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the words started to have a racist connotation. Today the terms “Hottentot” and “Boesman” are no longer being used; they are in fact politically unacceptable. It is rather significant, however, that certain Sangroups are beginning to insist on being called “Boesmans” once again. Some academics and writers have also commenced using this term once again.

Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Khoisan population underwent significant changes due to European colonialism and the exposure to a Western life style and also due to losing control over the natural resources which are necessary for their independent existence. Numerous Khoisan people were killed during wars with the Europeans and the Bantu tribes from the north and large numbers died from diseases brought in by the Europeans, of which the small pox epidemic during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was the most devastating. Many of the survivors were eventually integrated into the colonial community as house- and farm workers and later, as workers in industries. Many of them also settled close to mission stations where they formed substantial communities, e.g. at Genadendal, where they attempted to maintain their own identity, albeit with a Christian character. Eventually the true identity of many Khoisan was lost to the Coloured population (or whatever term one chooses to use here). Some groups did however retain certain unique characteristics e.g. the “Basters” (of Le Fleur – who have recently assumed the name, “Khoisan” for themselves), as well as several communities in the western

and specifically the north-western parts of the earlier Cape Province. Small groups of San (in some cases even larger groups of San) still to this day live as hunter-gatherers even while working on farms in certain parts of the Kalahari, in Botswana in particular, as well as in the Northern Cape.

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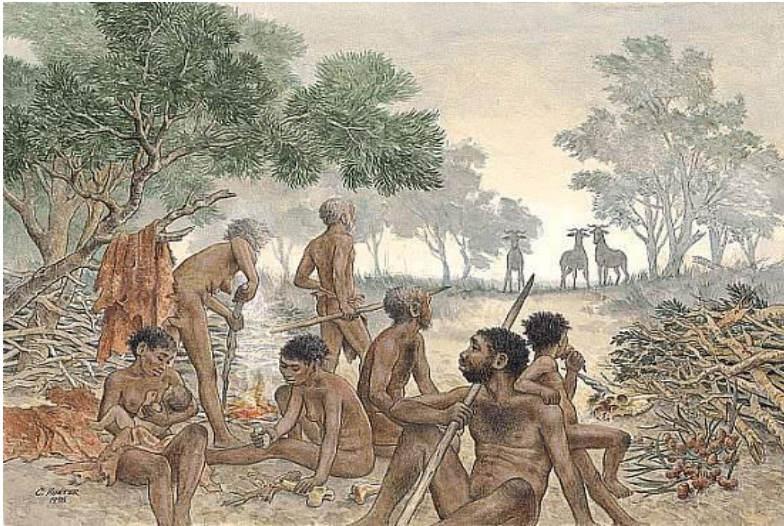
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### **Acknowledgements:**

1. The scetch of Early Stone Age people on p 4 was made by Cedric Hunter and copied from the official web page of Iziko Museums, Cape Town.
2. Photos and graphic material were copied and/or altered from references 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8 above.



Human beings have been living on the Southern Cape coast for more than a million years. This book gives us an overview of the prehistory of this area from the Earlier-, Middle- and Later Stone Ages, the Iron Age as well as the more recent prehistory and tells us about the people who lived here when there was nobody around to record their history. This information is deduced from investigations of the surviving artefacts they had left behind in their living quarters, as well as from their rock art and the stories told by descendants.

In the Stilbaai area the most important type of relic from the Middle Stone Age is a stone implement internationally known among archaeologists as "The Stillbay". The fish traps and shell middens found along the coast as well as the Blombos cave are still visible evidence of the Later Stone Age.