The Chronological Evidence for the Introduction of Domestic Stock into Southern Africa

C. Britt Bousman

This essay reviews radiocarbon dates associated with the earliest evidence of domestic stock in southern Africa and reviews existing models for their introduction in light of the current evidence. Two primary models exist for the introduction of domestic stock into southern Africa: an early Khoisan wave and an Early Iron Age source. Neither model is completely supported by the evidence. Available chronological evidence suggests that Khoisan and Iron Age herders simultaneously ushered domestic stock into the northern and eastern regions of southern Africa. Early Iron Age groups in southern Zambia are likely external sources. Khoisan herders exclusively introduced domestic stock into Namibia and the Cape. However, in the northern and eastern regions of southern Africa, stock possession and transfers probably were complex and involved both Khoisan and Iron Age groups.

KEY WORDS: southern Africa; domestic stock; Later Stone Age; Iron Age; Khoisan; radiocarbon dates.

1Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas 78249-0658.
INTRODUCTION

When, by what routes, and from what sources did domestic animals first reach southern Africa? Over the last 20 years many archaeologists believed that these questions had been successfully answered, but new evidence and critical review of current data indicate that answers are not firmly established. This paper assesses the radiocarbon evidence for stock keeping or herding in southern African, questions the source of domestic stock, and provides an alternative view for the initial introduction of domestic animals into southern Africa.

Khoisan Routes of Stock Introduction

Previously, most archaeologists accepted that domestic stock, initially sheep, were introduced by Khoisan groups before Iron Age incursions into southern Africa along one of two routes (Deacon et al., 1978; Klein, 1986). Both pre-Iron Age routes begin in eastern Africa and loop west through Zimbabwe into northern Botswana (Fig. 1). Two similar versions, based on rock art and oral traditions, propose a western route that arches down through Namibia into the southwestern Cape (Stow, 1905; Cooke, 1965). Then herders, or at least domestic stock, spread back to the east along the southern coast of South Africa. The second route, derived from linguistic evidence, begins in northern Botswana and leads south through the western Transvaal and Free State (Elphick, 1977; Ehert, 1982). It branches at the confluence of the Orange and Vaal rivers, with one path projecting west along the Orange River and splitting north and south on the western coast. The other branch extends south from the Orange–Vaal confluence following eastern Karoo rivers, e.g., Zeekoe River, and the western edge of the interior grasslands into the southeastern Cape, from where it spreads west along the southern coast and then north up the western coast. Also, it has been argued that this initial incursion of stock was by Khoisan groups before the spread of Iron Age populations into southern Africa. Numerous scholars have discussed theoretical models for the development of fully fledged pastoralism in southern Africa (Kinahan, 1991; Smith and Jacobson, 1995). However, this paper addresses only the initial spread of domestic animals. The initial spread may have been undertaken by groups that were not firmly dedicated to a pastoral economy.