



An exploration of interpersonal violence among Holocene foragers of Southern Africa



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ABSTRACT

A common assertion that humans are inherently aggressive toward one another is based in part on interpretation of anthropological evidence, including observational reports of Khoesan immediate-return hunter-gatherers of southern Africa. Bioarchaeological evidence from 446 dated South African Cape Holocene skeletons representing Khoesan ancestors provides an opportunity to review approaches to interpersonal conflict over thousands of years. A synthesis of paleodemographic and skeletal information suggests a complex picture. The pattern noted among descendant Khoesan groups of male killings via poison arrows is not discernable in ancestral demography. Published reports of healed cranial trauma are not geographically localized; most are adult men, and some can be parsimoniously explained as the outcomes of accidents. Skeletons with unhealed perimortem lesions are limited to the southwestern region, at dates around 2500 years ago; most are women and children. The perimortem skeletal trauma is contemporaneous with a period during which a transitory decline in adult stature occurs throughout the Cape but not in the region with the apparent violence. This suggests a novel, transient social pattern in that community. In sum, the disparate patterns of antemortem and perimortem trauma among these Holocene foragers support a narrative that emphasizes the situational nature, and the general rarity, of interpersonal violence.

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1. Introduction

Twenty-first century public intellectuals are arguing that humans are by nature aggressive toward one another (Diamond, 2013; Pinker, 2011; Wade, 2014; Wilson, 2012). As evidence of this assertion, they cite research not just from history and from actions of modern societies, but also from archaeological and ethnographic sources. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that this “aggression trend” comes at the same time as researchers studying human skeletal remains have made great strides in characterizing the effects of peri-mortem trauma on bone and determining the timing of trauma relative to time of death. Forensic advances have supported studies of past instances of conflict (Martin and Frayer, 1997; Martin and Harrod, 2012, 2015; Martin et al., 2012; Nielsen and Walker, 2009). While the researchers looking at past conflict are searching for clues to those rare instances where peaceful interaction breaks down (Martin and Harrod, 2012, 2015), their work has also

been used to support assertions like this one: “Archaeological sites are strewn with the evidence of mass conflict... Archaeologists have found burials of massacred people to be a commonplace” (The Social Conquest of Earth, 2012).

A similar distortion can be seen in the recruitment of the ethnographic literature to the cause of aggression as natural. Evidence from immediate-return hunter-gatherers is seen as particularly salient. The dialogue that followed Pinker’s 2011 book on the pacifying effect of successful states (The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined) focused on his interpretation of reported murder rates and differing views on how they should be interpreted (Lawler, 2012; Pinker, 2012; Wiessner and Pupu, 2012). There have been attempts to influence this debate through evidence of contemporary peaceful peoples (Benjamin et al., 2012), but missing from this discussion is the exploration of whether scholars can establish evidence of an absence of interpersonal conflict in the deeper past.

Throughout the history of the disciplines, archaeologists and ethnographers have explored instances of conflict for various reasons. Central motives include understanding the conditions under which order is disrupted and documenting the difficulties of achieving dispute resolution when people have a social system

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with no fixed, overriding authority. This scholarship has sometimes been interpreted as evidence that disruption is a common feature of the human condition—like Wilson’s chapter 8, “War as Humanity’s Hereditary Curse” (Wilson, 2012). Observers of past peoples—both living and dead—have reported instances of interpersonal violence. Does this mean that violence was commonplace? After all, observers do not report what they do not see. Can we document the absence of lethal violence? This paper is an attempt to document aspects of foragers’ lives over a period of several millennia, in a region that was relatively rich in resources for food and shelter. The foraging communities seem to have lived largely peaceful, cooperative lives. Researchers have examined many skeletons and have found scant evidence of trauma that can plausibly be attributed to interpersonal conflict. This normal, “peaceful” state can be juxtaposed against a relatively brief time during which people in one section of the broader region appear to have violently and fatally attacked one another. The unusual features of that violent time and place serve to highlight the absence of systematic violence otherwise. This story illustrates a larger generalization: that past human communities have interacted non-violently for millennia. Understanding the salient variables that contributed to that relatively peaceful state could help humans do it again.

After describing the context of this study, I will explore the topic of interpersonal conflict among the Holocene Khoesan ancestral population from three perspectives that are accessible through bioarchaeological methods. Evidence of antiquity for the pattern of manslaughter that has been documented in historic times will be explored through palaeodemographic methods. Evidence for non-fatal interpersonal violence will be explored through case studies of healed cranial trauma. These crania, reflecting an era of skull collecting, are curated at geographically widespread institutions (Morris, 2013; Steyn et al., 2013) and data defining archaeological contexts are scanty. These factors, combined with the challenges inherent in quantifying healed lesions, limit the potential of more quantitative approaches. The cases provided here illustrate a broad range of potential causes from an extensive geographic range. Evidence for fatal interpersonal violence will be explored through case studies of unhealed skeletal trauma. These come from sites of a more narrow geographic scope. While interpretations are open to debate, my conclusions are that there is an absence of evidence for targeted killing of men, there is occasional evidence of non-fatal interpersonal aggression incurred by men, and there is one temporal/spatial window during which women and children were sometimes purposely killed. As is frequently noted by anthropologists who study violence (Martin and Harrod, 2015), among Khoesan ancestors violent behaviors were inherently cultural, and were subject to variability in their nature and intensity.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Foragers of the Later Stone Age, Southern Africa

The cultural stage known as the Later Stone Age (LSA) of southern Africa, from ca. 40,000 BP to historic times, appears to have developed in situ from the Middle Stone Age, as reflected in current debates about when to mark the LSA’s beginning (Barham and Mitchell, 2008; Deacon and Deacon, 1999; Mitchell, 2002). While archaeological evidence of the Later Stone Age can be found throughout southern Africa, the comparatively mild climate and availability of resources of coastal zones made these regions the focus of foragers’ exploitation (Fig. 1). Stretching about 2000 km from the southwestern coast of South Africa to Mozambique on the east side, the frequently rocky shores reliably yielded food, thanks to the Benguela oceanic current on the Atlantic side and the Agulhas oceanic current on the Indian Ocean side. Human pop-

ulations were most numerous in the fynbos and afro-montane forest biomes, exploiting an exceptional diversity of plants—including edible corms, fruits and seeds—as well as marine protein and small-to-medium sized terrestrial animals. Hunting technology included hafted, light poison-tipped arrows that delivered a neurotoxin, likely combined with the practice of persistence tracking (Wadley et al., 2009).

Modern genetic diversity among descendants indicates that Khoesan peoples were numerous since the origin of the lineage, ~100–150 thousand years ago, with no evidence of precipitous decline (bottlenecks) (Kim et al., 2014). There were some regional interactions with African farmers who moved south into the region starting around 1200 years ago, but foraging lifeways continued along the coast until European colonization began, ca. 1650’s A.D. Northern and more interior regions were less directly affected by the non-Khoesan newcomers. Descendant Khoesan-speaking groups continued to live as foragers along the Orange River, and in regions of what are now the modern states of Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Angola, especially in the Kalahari. While the coastal groups known archaeologically may represent lineages that were somewhat distinct from the survivors of historic times (Morris et al., 2014), the core components of the genome, tool kit and subsistence approaches show continuity from Middle Stone Age times (d’Errico et al., 2012). Archaeological and genetic lines of evidence complement one another (Schlebusch et al., 2013).

There are variations in topography, precipitation and ecology along the coast. Precipitation patterns include predominantly winter rainfall along the west coast, non-seasonal rainfall along the south coast, and summer rainfall along the east coast (Fig. 1). While generally homogeneous (Deacon and Deacon, 1999), archaeological evidence suggests some regional cultural features. Along the west coast, around 32°S, the millennium of 3000–2000 BP is associated with large shell middens, whereas during prior and subsequent times, evidence of human occupation is found more commonly within rock shelters. This is known as the “megamidden” period, with discussion ongoing about interpretations (Jerardino, 2012; Jerardino et al., 2008; Parkington et al., 2013). Along the southern coast, within the relatively well-watered afro-montane forest biome, dietary stable isotope evidence suggests the presence of territoriality among local groups between 4500 and 2000 BP (Sealy, 2006). To the east of the coastal forest, the fynbos biome grades into grasslands, the shore becomes less suitable for shellfish, and LSA occupation gradually diminishes as one scans eastward. From these more easterly rock shelters there is some evidence of plant storage, from mid-Holocene and subsequent times (Deacon, 1979). Together, these examples suggest regional deviations from immediate-return foraging. To acknowledge regional differences, the LSA skeletons will be divided into four groups: the northwest coast (north of 33°S), the southwest coast (around the modern city of Cape Town), the south coast (afro-montane forest and adjacent region to the west) and the eastern coast (a region of transition from fynbos to grasslands, east of 24°E, extending to north of the modern city of Durban).

Human burials of the coastal forelands and the Cape Fold Mountains of South Africa have been explored and excavated since the early 20th century. Through both purposeful archaeological excavations and chance discoveries, hundreds of human skeletons have been reported and retained in collections. All are primary interments, and almost all are individual burials. Very few are clustered in cemetery-like contexts. In the northwest and southwest, coastal burials of single individuals in sand or shell with no grave gifts or personal goods are typical. In the south and east, single burials are more commonly found in rock shelters, sometimes with gifts included.

Early excavators tended to retain only the adult crania, now held in institutions around the world (Legassick and Rassool, 2000;

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