

The Market Economy of Sheep Farming in the 19th and 20th Century Cape Colony: A Case Study from the Eastern Cape Province

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1. Introduction

By the mid-19th century, sheep farming had successfully spread across the Cape Colony and beyond. Indigenous hairy sheep were cross bred with European breeds for meat, while Spanish merino flocks produced wool of excellent quality. Following the massive decline of animal numbers during the South African War (1899-1902), the industry experienced unprecedented growth, and eventually became a leading international wool exporter. By 1880, systematic sheep breeding was well established, with several eminent stud flocks in the Cape Colony¹. These farms and studs often overshadow the smaller scale farmer – in particular the migrant and semi-migrant farmer or *trekboer*. Combining preliminary results from an archaeozoological study with historical documentary sources, we examine livestock management from the *trekboer*'s perspective.

2. Case Study

Excavations on the farm Welkomskraal in the Eastern Cape recovered a faunal assemblage dating from the 1880s to 1920s. Sheep remains dominate the assemblage, linking the property to the regional sheep farming economy. Fragmented shears (Fig. 2), landowners' movable property records² and known merino farming within the region¹ all suggest that the remains are those of wool sheep. Archaeozoological methods were used to determine whether sheep farming on Welkomskraal focussed on wool production or whether meat and milk were important as well (i.e. subsistence rather than profit driven economy).



Figure 2: Excavated shears from Welkomskraal

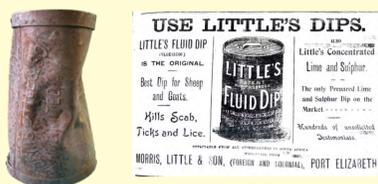


Figure 3: Morris, Little & Son sheep dip can found on surface of Welkomskraal, and its advert in a local newspaper (c.19th century)



Figure 1: Group of men shearing sheep, unknown location, c. 19th century⁵

3. Methods

Reconstructing herd management strategies require age-at-death rates to determine kill-off patterns. These patterns will in turn reflect whether sheep were managed for meat, milk or wool production, or a combination thereof³. Following Greenfield's³ model, a predominance of 'adult' specimens indicate wool production; 'very immature' suggest milk production and a more balanced representation show meat production. Sheep bones were broadly aged according to epiphysal fusion rates⁴ and localised tooth wear patterns and then grouped according to 'very immature' (up to 1 year), 'sub-adult' (1 to 3 years) and 'adult' (older than 3 years). Grouping specimens in this way did not prove satisfactory since epiphysal fusion rates often overlap between sub-adult and adult ages and it was decided to create a fourth 'older sub-adult/younger adult' (2 to 4 years) category.

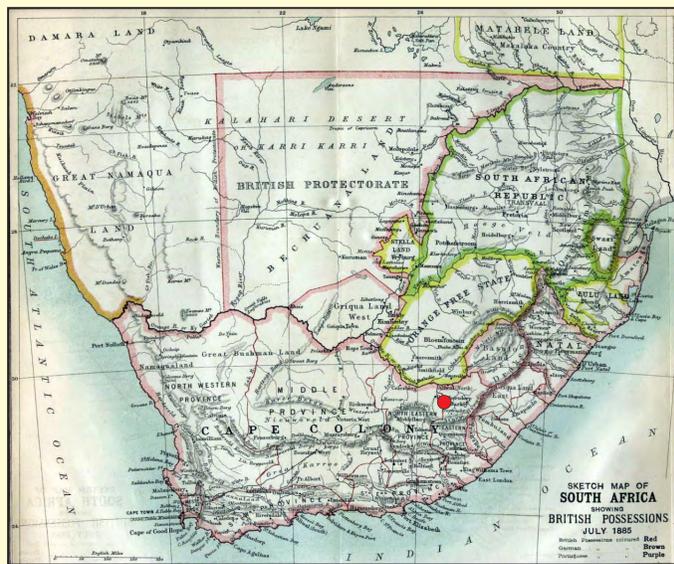


Figure 4: Map of South Africa showing political boundaries in 1885, with research area indicated

5. Current & Future Work

Analysis of the faunal assemblages from two more Welkomskraal farmstead middens is underway, which will increase the sheep sample size and allow for broader comparisons to be made. Osteometric data on modern wool and meat Merino sheep will be collected from veterinary research institutes and compared to historic assemblages to identify different breeds in the archaeological record and track changes in breed improvements over time. In so doing, we hope to move beyond archaeological significance by providing a temporal depth to historical livestock management in South Africa based on the material remains themselves.

4. Subsistence or Profit?

The results show that sheep roughly between the age of two and four years dominate the assemblage. This does not fit the expected 'adult' or 'wool pattern'. Instead, a slightly more balanced representation appears, which, according to the model indicates a focus on meat or meat-and-milk production⁴. However, the majority of specimens fall within the older sub-adult/adult group, which possibly reflects a slight emphasis on wool production in combination with meat and milk (i.e. subsistence combined with profit).

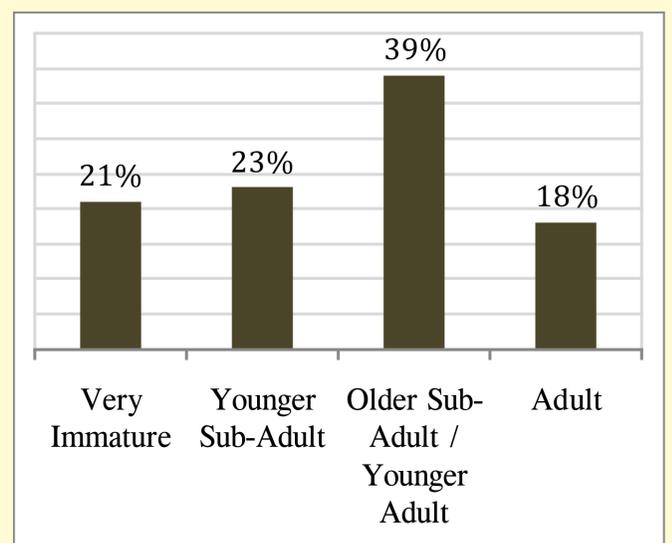


Figure 5: Percentage of specimens based on Number of Identified Specimen (NIS) counts

The kill-off pattern suggests that small-scale migrant farmers did not keep herds purely for profit. However, archival records show that these farmers may also have kept other sheep breeds in addition to Merino's². Perhaps the animals killed at prime weight were not wool Merino's but breeds kept specifically for household consumption. Application of a general slaughter model to 19th century small scale migrant farmers within a market economy is not that simple or straightforward; however, it serves as a useful starting point for further enquiry. Whether Welkomskraal's farmers actively managed their herds for wool production or whether small profits were a mere by-product of general subsistence farming remains to be confirmed through further study.

References

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³GREENFIELD, H.J. 1988. The origins of milk and wool production in the Old World: a zooarchaeological perspective from the Central Balkans. *Current Anthropology* 29: 573-593
⁴SILVER, I.A. 1969. The aging of domestic animals. In Brothwell, D.R. & Higgs, E.S. (eds.) *Science in Archaeology: A Survey of Progress and Research*. London: Thames & Hudson, pp. 283-302
⁵CAPE ARCHIVE, J1 342 Sheep shearing, no date

Acknowledgments: Ditsong National Museum of Natural History, Dr. Shaw Badenhorst, Dr. Ina Plug, Xander Antonites