



Periods in African Archaeology

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TOPIC: Periods in African Archaeology

THEME: Archaeology

DEPARTMENT: Earth Sciences



Proconsul teeth fossil
Source: Nairobi National Museum

Lesson Objectives

1. To identify the different periods in African Archaeology.
2. To discuss and appreciate the salient features of the different periods.

Learning resources

1. Text
2. Video
3. Photo

Periods in African Archaeology: An Overview

Archaeology covers a wide range of topics and time periods, from the study of early humans and Prehistoric cultures to historical periods and more recent industrial societies. It contributes to our understanding of human evolution, technological advancements, social organisation, economic systems, art, religious practices, and the impact of humans on the environment.

African archaeology is incredibly diverse due to the continent's vast size, varied geography, and rich cultural history. As a result, the classification of periods in African archaeology can vary depending on the region, cultural groups, and archaeological traditions being studied. However, a broad overview typically recognizes several major periods that help organise and understand the archaeological record of Africa.

These periods are not universally applicable to all regions of Africa, but they offer a general framework for discussing the historical and cultural development of the continent. They include; Stone Age, Pastoral Neolithic, Iron Age, Historic and Contemporary periods.



Turkana Boy/ Homo erectus

Source: Cradle of Mankind Gallery at Nairobi National Museum

The Stone Age

The Stone Age is a pre-historic period characterised by the use of stone tools and the absence of metal tools. It's a broad term that encompasses a significant portion of human history, during which various technological advancements and cultural developments took place. In Africa, this period spans a vast time frame, ranging from 3.3 million to 10,000 years ago, and witnessing remarkable changes in human societies and their interactions with the environment.

The Stone Age in Africa was a dynamic and complex period marked by significant developments in tool technology, symbolic expression, and cultural adaptation. The artefacts, tools, and artworks left behind by our ancient ancestors provide valuable insights into their lives, beliefs, and interactions with the world around them. It can be divided into three major periods: the Early Stone Age (ESA), the Middle Stone Age (MSA) and the Later Stone Age (LSA). Each of these periods is marked by distinct changes in technology, subsistence strategies, social organisation, and artistic expression.

1. Early Stone Age (ESA): Recent research in West Turkana shows that the ESA began 3.3 million years ago. Before this discovery, the earliest tools known as the Oldowan tradition began around 2.6 million years ago. During this period, early hominins, such as *Australopithecus* and *Homo habilis*, used simple stone tools, primarily flakes and choppers, for cutting and scavenging. These tools were basic and largely unmodified from the natural stone materials.

2. Middle Stone Age (MSA): The MSA is a significant phase of human evolution and culture, lasting from around 300,000 to 30,000 years ago. It's associated with the appearance of *Homo sapiens* and the development of more sophisticated stone tools, such as blades, points, and scrapers. The MSA also witnessed the emergence of symbolic behaviour, as evidenced by engraved ochre, beads, and possible early forms of art.

3. **Later Stone Age (LSA):** The LSA, starting around 30,000 years ago and continuing until the advent of agriculture, is characterised by even more advanced stone tool technology, including the production of finely crafted blades, microliths, and composite tools like arrows and harpoons. The LSA also saw the expansion of artistic expression, with cave paintings, rock engravings, and personal ornaments becoming more common.



*Tools from the Acheulean Industry
Source: Cradle of Mankind Gallery at
Nairobi National Museum*



Bone Harpoons: Probably first made of wood, harpoons were used for exploiting aquatic resources. They had grooves at one end where they were attached to a stick. They can be uniserial, biserial or triserial. In northern Kenya, they have been found in association with large amounts of fish bones.

*Bone Harpoons
Source: Cradle of Mankind Gallery at
Nairobi National Museum*



Microliths such as these crescents and backed blades were hafted onto sticks to make compound tools.

*Microliths
Source: Cradle of Mankind Gallery at
Nairobi National Museum*

The Pastoral Neolithic (PN)

This is a period of significant cultural and economic phase that occurred in various regions of Africa. This period was characterised by the adoption of pastoralism as a primary subsistence strategy, alongside the continued utilisation of agriculture, and hunting and gathering practices. The Pastoral Neolithic represents a transitional phase between the earlier Stone Age and the emergence of more complex societies in certain regions.

Key features of the Pastoral Neolithic period are:

- 1. Shift to pastoralism:** One of the defining features of the Pastoral Neolithic was the increased reliance on domesticated animals for sustenance. Communities began to raise animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and sometimes camels. This shift allowed for a more stable and reliable source of food, particularly in areas where agriculture was challenging due to environmental factors.
- 2. Settlement patterns:** During this period, some communities transitioned from being purely nomadic to semi-nomadic or settled, with seasonal movements in search of pasture and water for their livestock. These settlements could be temporary or more permanent, and they often featured simple structures for shelter and storage.
- 3. Economic diversity:** While pastoralism was a significant focus, many communities in the Pastoral Neolithic period maintained a mixed economy. They continued to engage in agriculture, and hunting and gathering activities, creating a diversified subsistence strategy that provided resilience against environmental fluctuations.

4. **Technological developments:** The adoption of pastoralism was accompanied by changes in technology. Tools related to animal husbandry, such as milking containers and implements for processing animal products, became more prominent. Additionally, pottery was often used for storing and processing dairy products.

5. **Social and cultural implications:** The emergence of pastoralism led to changes in social structures and cultural practices. The ownership and management of livestock likely played a role in shaping kinship systems and social hierarchies. The availability of surplus resources, such as milk and meat, could have contributed to increased social differentiation.

6. **Interaction and trade:** Pastoralist communities often engaged in interactions with neighbouring societies. Trade networks could form around the exchange of livestock, agricultural products, and other resources. These interactions contributed to the exchange of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices.



Pastoral Neolithic

Source: Cradle of Mankind Gallery at Nairobi National Museum

Iron Age Periods

1. **Early Iron Age:** This period saw the introduction and widespread use of iron tools and weapons, leading to advancements in agriculture, technology and social organisation.
2. **Late Iron Age:** During this time, many regions in Africa saw the rise of complex societies, including states and kingdoms, often marked by increased trade, urbanisation and political centralization.

Historic Periods

1. **Early Historical Period:** This period is marked by the flourishing of various African empires, such as the Thimlich Ohinga, Mali Empire, Ghana Empire, and Great Zimbabwe. Trade routes connected Africa with the broader world, influencing cultures and economies.
2. **Colonial Period:** European colonial powers established dominance over various regions of Africa, leading to significant cultural, political, and economic changes. This period also includes resistance movements and struggles for independence.



*Entrance of Kochieng enclosure at Thimlich Ohinga
Source: National Museums of Kenya*

3. **Post-Colonial Period:** After gaining independence from colonial rule, many African nations experienced significant social, political, and economic transformations, including nation-building, urbanisation, and globalisation.

Contemporary Period

The contemporary period encompasses the present day and includes on-going archaeological research that helps us understand the dynamic interactions between traditional cultures, modern societies, and globalisation.



Rocket

Source: NMK - Archaeology