

Robben Island

Introduction

Robben Island, also known in Afrikaans as Robbeneiland, or as Esiqithini in isi-Xhosa, is geologically the top of a small ancient hill that comprises of sedimentary rocks of the Tygerberg Formation of the Malmesbury Group. Calcrete conglomerates and partially consolidated sands overlie these. A thin horizon of quaternary unconsolidated sand deposits cover much of the Island. The overlying unconsolidated deposits are reported to be relatively thin, attaining a maximum thickness of about 10m.

The sedimentary rocks are weathered and comprise of alternating layers of shale, siltstone and greywacke. Bands of hard quartzitic sandstones are also present. Due to isoclinal folding, the rocks are fractured, folded and steeply dipping. These properties provide the rocks with their water-bearing capabilities.

Historically, the inhabitants of Robben Island relied entirely on groundwater in the form of springs for a supply of water (Deacon, 1996). Groundwater is abstracted from eleven boreholes. During the mid-1980's, the Department of Correctional Services constructed a fully-fledged water desalinating plant on the island. The plant is capable of producing 50 000 litres of potable water per day.

Two pre-colonial archaeological sites have been found on the island. Both of these are very ephemeral stone artefact scatters consisting of quartz irregular cores and flakes. No associated bone or other items were found. Both sites are close to each other and situated in the central island area west of the Maximum Security Prison

The two sites that have been found are known as surface scatters - i.e. they are not buried. There are good theoretical reasons to assume that other pre-colonial material exists on the island. These may be buried under layers of windblown sand, or within the calcretes on the island.

Because no finds of this nature are associated with two Stone Age sites, we hypothesise that the stone artefacts date to the end of the last ice age (terminal

Pleistocene) when sea levels were substantially lower and Robben Island formed a low hill on the coastal mainland.

Before 20 000 years ago the coastline of the sub-continent would have been several kilometres west of Robben Island close to the edge of the continental shelf. After 20 000 years ago the world climate began to warm resulting in gradually rising sea levels which reached a maximum height of about 2 metres higher than present during the Mid-Holocene about 4000 years ago. This means that the age of the pre-colonial sites could be 10 000 years or older.

Historical background

The documented history of the Khoisan people of the Cape precedes the documented history of the arrival of European expedition vessels from the late 15th century. Richards (2017:65), suggests that the Khoe, who were pastoralists, and the San, who were hunter-gatherers, settled in Southern Africa over 2000 years ago. These peoples are today known collectively as the Khoisan. They were later joined by Bantu tribes who migrated from around central Africa to settle mostly in what is today the border area between South Africa and Zimbabwe, around the Limpopo River. This region became an economic powerhouse, called the Kingdom of Mapungubwe, between AD900 – AD1300, (Richards, 2017: 65). The reason for the commercial success of the Kingdom was due to trade relationships with China, Persia and India through the main port city of current day Mozambique, (Richards, 2017: 65).

It is further suggested as a plausible argument by De Villiers (1971: 3), that it was in fact the Phoenicians that may have had the first external contact with the Khoisan around 485BC when the Pharaoh Necho is recorded to have instructed a crew of sailors to head southward on a journey of discovery and exploration. His assumption is also informed by the discovery of a San rock painting on the Southwest coast of the Cape, which depicts a Phoenician ship. The argument hence follows that the period of the San's habitation of the Cape coincides with the Phoenicians' southward voyage

and that it may be possible that the Phoenicians made contact with the indigenous population. De Villiers (1971: 3) comments that the Reverend Sidney Welch comments in his book, *Europe's Discovery of South Africa* (1935: 58), that scholars of his time had found traces of Sabeian influence in the Bantu and San language and San rock-paintings further indicates it. Sabeian, according to Welch (1935: 58), is the term afforded to races, which occupied the south-west of Arabia before the rise of Islam. This indicates that the foreign contact with the Khoisan people could not have started in 15th century as described by European or Eurocentric authors, but that inter-tribal and extra-tribal relationships already existed.

It is widely accepted that Bartholomeu Dias and in particular, his second-in-command, Joao Del Infanto was the first European to step onto Robben Island, (Smith, 1997: 8). It is the expedition of Bartholomeu Dias, which records the first European contact with the Khoisan, when their carvel stranded in present-day Mossel Bay around 1488. Richards (2017: 66), writes about an incident where the Khoisan of the area attacked the crew of the stranded carvel with stones. They did this presumably because of the indiscriminate use of freshwater resources in the area without following due protocols of trying to announce their arrival and their intention with the visit. They also omitted to request permission to use the freshwater resources of the Khoisan group. Naturally, the foreigners retaliated and shot two Khoisan men, killing one and injuring the second. News of the incident must have reached the Cape clans, as from then on all future meetings between the Portuguese and the Khoisan was marred with violence. Records also suggest that a Portuguese visit to the Cape in 1502 ended in the crew seeking shelter on Robben Island and their overnight stay on the island inside a cave, which they called "Portugal", (Smith, 1997: 8). It is Deacon (1996:10), who quotes a text written by Kolbe (1727), suggesting that these Portuguese sailors were in fact part of Vasco Da Gama's fleet which rounded the Cape in 1498. She further suggests that the sailors were in fact "fearful of the cannibals of the mainland", (Deacon, 1996: 10).

The second altercation between the Portuguese and the Khoisan happened 22 years later in 1510 at what is termed the Battle of Salt River. A Portuguese fleet of three ships under the command of Viceroy Francisco de Almeida is defeated by the Khoisan on the banks of the Salt River in present-day Woodstock. Deacon (1996: 10) suggests that De Almeida tried to steal cattle, women and children from the Khoisan. This infuriated the Khoisan, mobilised them to fight against the Portuguese, and in the battle

killed De Almeida and fifty of his crew, (Deacon, 1996: 10). The Portuguese were humiliated by this defeat and opted not to return to the Cape of Good Hope.

The Portuguese were therefore unsuccessful at settling at the Cape, if it ever had been their intention, but the Dutch, whose maritime prominence comes to the fore only with the establishment of the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) or Dutch East-India Company, advance themselves to take the land and its people and resources. In fact, the Eurocentric documentation of events leads us to understand that there was a race between the British and the Dutch to claim the title (with its rich reward in benefits) of being the coloniser of the Cape for themselves.



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The Prisons on Robben Island 1667-1991

Background

Robben Island was used for incarceration throughout its documented history until 1996 when the last convict prison on the island closed its doors. The earliest documented imprisonment, albeit that they were deserted on the island, was that of convicted highwaymen from England in 1614. Indigenous Khoi people were incarcerated on the island from the time of the Dutch occupation at the Cape in 1652. The first person

recorded to be jailed on the island for politically motivated reasons, in 1658, was Autshumato, a leader of the Goringaichona Khoi at the Cape. Over the centuries, various notable clerics from the East-Indies islands who protested against the Dutch occupation of their lands were arrested and banished to Robben Island. During the British occupation of the Cape, the English banished Khoi, Xhosa, Hlubi and Korana chiefs and warriors whom were captured during the *Wars of Dispossession* and banished them to the island. The penitentiaries existed alongside other mainstream activities, which were conducted on the island, even up until the WWII period when the South African Navy occupied Robben Island. The control over Robben Island was transferred to the Prisons Department from 1960, who then turned the island into the notorious prison island famed today for having incarcerated some of Southern Africa's bravest liberation fighters.

Ou Tronk (Old Jail)

When the first political prisoners arrived on Robben Island from 1961, they were housed together with common-law offenders in the Ou Tronk. This is an assemblage of buildings around the north-eastern corner of the island. The structures originate during the WWII period when it was used as a barracks for detained soldiers. The original cellblocks were of timber and iron construction and consisted of five communal cellblocks (barracks), an ablution block, a kitchen block, a hospital and an administrative block. These structures existed during the 1950's and were supplemented in 1960 by the construction of eight brick buildings. It is estimated that the carrying capacity at the Ou Tronk was for five hundred inmates. Over-crowding was reached within the early part of 1962 when mass convictions of political prisoners took place in the aftermath of the banning of the liberation organisations in 1960. During his first period of imprisonment for illegally leaving South Africa without proper travel documents, former statesman, Dr Nelson Mandela spent a few months in the Ou Tronk before being transferred to Johannesburg to stand trial in the Rivonia Trial. Robert Sobukwe too, was transferred to the Ou Tronk on Robben Island just prior to finishing his sentence of three years imprisonment for his role in organising the anti-pass campaigns. He was then subsequently placed under solitary banishment on Robben Island until 1969.

Sobukwe Complex

Located on the eastern shore of the island, the Sobukwe complex consist of four buildings that date from the WWII period of occupation on the island. The buildings served different purposes at the time, until Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the then leader of the Pan Africanist Congress, was sentenced to serve out an undetermined period of solitary banishment inside one of the buildings. The “Sobukwe Clause” in the General Law Amendment Act (1963) provided for the annual renewal of the banishment order at the discretion of the Minister of Justice. The banishment order was renewed every year from 1963 until 1969 when Sobukwe was released from Robben Island to serve out his banishment in Kimberley, where he was allowed to live with his family and to work.

Zinc Tronk

The zinc jail was built to cope with the overcrowding of the “Ou Tronk” during the early 1960’s and served as a transitional space for many prisoners whilst they were building the Maximum Security Prison (MSP). The structures were constructed of corrugated iron sheets on cement foundations. The structure was constructed in a rectangular shape and had a courtyard in the centre. The zinc jail also had the first library for prisoners, which was run by some of the prisoners. It is commonly perceived that the zinc jail only accommodated common-law prisoners, but political prisoners also occupied the space, at least until the Maximum Security Prison was opened in 1964. The group of 38 Namibian prisoners who arrived on Robben Island in 1968 were mostly imprisoned in the Zinc Tronk before they were later moved to mainly the D-Section of the MSP. Ex-Political Prisoner testimonies about the zinc jail speak about the harsh conditions in that section due to weather extremities during Winter and Summer. Prison warders would walk along the outer wall of the corrugated structure in the morning and run their batons along the corrugation to wake the prisoners up for their day of hard labour.

Maximum Security Prison (MSP)

The Maximum Security Prison was built in 1963. This followed the mass arrest of anti-Apartheid activists in the aftermath of the banning of liberation organisations in 1960. The prisoners were all sentenced to conduct hard labour as part of their prison sentence. One of these hard labour teams called the "Bou Span" (Building Team) was responsible for the construction of the Maximum Security Prison and other building projects on the island. The MSP only underwent structural changes on its isolation cell-block during 1978 along with the erection of the 3m high walls aimed at separating the different sections from each other. The prison precinct consists of the following sections:

Reception Block

The administrative area for wardens working inside the prison and also where prisoners were registered upon their arrival at prison.

Hospital Section

A mix of general wards and single wards for prisoners who fell ill or who had to lay in transit whilst waiting to attend hospital on the mainland.

A-Section

This section became synonymous with the second layer of leadership of different organisations after the 1976 influx of youth into prison.

B-Section

The leadership of the different political organisations in prison was held in this section. Great effort was employed to not have any contact for the leadership with the rest of the prison, hence underground communication flourished throughout the prison.

C-Section

This section was both the observation section for new inmates as well as the section where you are sentenced to for punishment if found in contravention of prison regulations. Punishment meted out varied from withholding three meals per day from prisoners to corporal punishment, or the laying of further charges onto your existing prison sentence.

D-Section

The first of the H-type shaped blocks, which was used as communal cellblocks with four communal cells per block. Namibian freedom fighters occupied this block for the longest duration of their imprisonment before their release in 1985.

E-Section

This section became notorious for housing the more aggressive prisoners of the 1976 influx of youth into the prison. Due to the isolated location of the cellblock, it was commonly referred to, amongst political prisoners, as *Siberia*.

F-Section

Located alongside the G-Section cellblock, these two sections developed a healthy rivalry on the sports field.

G-Section

Also known as the study section as most prisoners in the general sections who had study privileges were kept in the G-Section.

Prison Hall

The prison hall was used for different purposes at different times. As a recreational venue, prisoners practised boxing, complete with a boxing ring inside the hall. During the late 1970's it was also used at the end of the Summer Games sporting tournaments for the awards ceremony for all participants.

Kitchen Section

Common-law prisoners initially ran the prison kitchen and food preparation. This changed with the introduction of the Kitchen Committee in the late 1960's when political prisoners took charge of this function. This committee was representative of seconded members of different political organisations. The organisations would second their members to serve on the committee in order to be part of the real work of the Kitchen, which was to serve as a hub for covert communication smuggling inside prison. The prisoners who worked in the kitchen were locked up in three cells next to the kitchen and the boiler room attendants slept inside the boiler room.

Sports Field

The sports field was built by prisoners after they demolished the Zink Tronk. The plumbing and foundational infrastructure of the jail section was used as irrigation and drainage for the sports field. The field hosted many soccer and rugby matches as well as tennis, volleyball, and the annual Summer Games. During the build-up to the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup in South Africa, the field was used to host many participating international teams in friendly matches in honour of Nelson Mandela.

Medium B Prison (now Multi-Purpose Learning Centre)

The current Multi-Purpose Learning Centre (MPLC) was originally a WWII structure, which served as barracks for military personnel and as an assembly hall for military events. During the early 1960's, the complex was used by the Coloured prison wardens for training courses whilst they were still stationed on the island. The complex was converted into a Medium Security Prison for common-law prisoners during the 1970's. The hall sections was turned into three large communal prison cells and additional cells were added for an isolation section. This block closed down as a prison in 1996 when Robben Island closed as a prison island and the national estate was transferred to the Department of Arts & Culture. The complex was transformed into the current Multi-Purpose Learning Centre in 2004, capacitated with a Reference Library, Dining Hall and fitted kitchen, Arts workshop, Lecture halls and serviced overnight accommodation in single, double and dormitory rooms.

Power Generation

The energy supply on Robben Island has embraced sustainability principles in the establishment of a photovoltaic supply plant measuring 1 (one) hectare. This solar plant has a capacity of generating between 300 kW to 500 kW to supply the island grid. Historically, the electricity supply was achieved through generator engines. The current power station was established in 1993 and supplies 275kW to the island grid via five diesel engines.

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