
HISTORY

Human Origins

It is now widely accepted that human beings first appeared in eastern Africa. They lived in the savanna grasslands and in areas adjacent to the lakes of the Rift Valley. Much of the evidence for this comes from paleontological research in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Kenya. It is estimated that human society emerged about 2 million years ago; these earliest human beings are known as *homo habilis* and they mastered the art of making stone tools (Photos 28 and 29). Around 1.5 million years ago *homo erectus*, the first to walk upright, emerged. By 40,000 years ago our direct ancestors, *homo sapiens*, appeared.



Photos 28 and 29: Stone hand axes at Olorgesailie National Monument

The pioneers of research into human origins in East Africa were the Leakeys, Mary and Louis. They began their work at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and established the earliest evidence of prehistoric hominid settlements in the region. Subsequent work by their son Richard, his wife Meave, and Kenyan associates, including Kamoya Kimeu, Wambua Mangao, Nzube Mutiwa and Samuel Ngui along the shores of Lake Turkana showed that humans originated around two million years ago and hominids were present four million years ago.

Much of the research on human origins in Kenya has been organized through the National Museum of Kenya, in Nairobi; and many of the fossils and artifacts that they have found are on display there. The few skeletons of early people are so valuable that they are stored in locked vaults!

The earliest humans probably lived in small scattered groups and were very mobile. The lakes provided them a variety of resources including water, fish and wildlife that were a source of meat. The descendants of these groups were found in Kenya when other people began to migrate into the region - the Bantu from West Africa and Cushitic and Nilotic people from the north.

The Historic Period

The people living in Kenya's interior are descended from groups who began to migrate into the area as early as 3000 years ago. The first migrants were herding people who came from the north around Lake Turkana. These are the ancestors of the Cushitic Boran, Somali and Gabbra and the Nilotic Luo, Maasai and Kalenjin. Later, Bantu migrants, ancestors of the contemporary Kikuyu, Kamba, Meru, and Embu moved across central Africa from the area that is now Cameroon. These people were farmers who had mastered the art of making iron tools. The early settlement history of these different groups is still relatively poorly understood.

Settlement and trade along the coast is much better documented and can be traced back for over 2000 years. Egyptian documents from the time of the Pharaohs, about 2600 years ago, appear to mention trade along the coast, and by 2000 years ago Greek traders were recording visits to the coast in ships' logs. The coast of East Africa was also mentioned in Greek accounts written in the first and second centuries A.D. listing items of trade from the region that included ivory, tortoiseshell, and spices. This trade continued and expanded during the Roman Empire.

By the 9th century, a dynamic Arab trading network had been established that linked ports of the east coast of Africa, such as Gedi (Photos 30 and 31), to trade with the Arabian Sea and across

the Indian Ocean to India and China. The coastal city states that participated in this trade include Siu, Pate, Lamu, Malindi, Gedi, Mombasa, and Vanga. The traders from overseas brought such items as clothes, beads, wines, iron weapons, porcelain, and handicrafts. These were exchanged for ivory, timber, gold, copper, rhinoceros horns, animal skins, and slaves. This trade continued with great prosperity and under relatively peaceful conditions until the arrival of the Portuguese along the coast of East Africa, in an expedition led by Vasco da Gama in 1498.



Photos 30 and 31: Ruins at the 15th Century Arab-African town of Gedi on the Kenyan coast at Watamu

The Portuguese developed an interest in the East African coast following Vasco da Gama's journey of finding a route to Asia. Vasco da Gama sailed from Portugal, went around Africa, then on to India. The Portuguese were interested in establishing trading routes around the Horn of Africa to India. They also wanted to control and dominate the lucrative Indian Ocean trade, conquer several city-states along the coast, and establish their dominance. The Indian Ocean trade was carried out by the coastal city states and countries in Asia such as India, Southeast Asia and China. The city-states also traded with inland kingdoms like Great Zimbabwe to obtain gold,

ivory, and iron. These materials were then sold to countries in Asia. At the same time, the East African city-states were buying items from Asia. Such items included cotton, silk, and porcelain objects.

The Portuguese conquest of the East African coast lasted for about 200 years. However, the Portuguese rule was hated by the people of the city states. They were finally evicted from the coastal towns through local resistance aided by the Omani Arabs. To ensure the Portuguese did not return, Sultan Seyyid Said of Oman moved his capital to Zanzibar and ruled the entire East African coastline until the establishment of British rule. When they arrived along the east coast of Africa they were confronted by the Arabs. Conflict broke out between them, and unsettled conditions lasted until 1720 when the Portuguese were finally defeated.

For the next 100 years the prosperity of the coastal areas declined. However, in 1820 peace was reestablished and the trading economy began to recover. By the mid-1880s the major European powers, Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium were actively colonizing Africa. The British gained control of the Kenya coast and quickly began to develop ports and to build a railway into the interior to tap the productive agricultural resources of the Buganda Kingdom in what is now Uganda. They also needed to have the railway to help them gain military control over the headwaters of the River Nile.

The interior had been settled for centuries by farming and herding peoples. By the 1840s, Arabs and Swahili traders were penetrating the interior in search of ivory and slaves. This was a time when powerful East African peoples such as the Nandi and the Maasai were also engaged in conflicts over territory.

The earliest European explorers reached the area in the middle of the 19th century. One of these, the German Johann Krapf traveled in Kenya in 1849 and named the area Kenya. This name is thought to be his mistaken pronunciation of the Kamba name for Mt. Kenya! These early

explorers had to deal with the traders and with the established African communities. Their travels indicated the economic potential of the interior, particularly the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda.

To reach the rich agricultural resources of Uganda, far inland from what is today Kenya, the British decided to build a railway from the port of Mombasa to Uganda, beginning in 1896. By 1899 it had reached Nairobi and Kisumu, then Port Florence, on Lake Victoria in 1901. The construction of the railway brought them into conflict with the African people of the area and by force of superior European arms the Africans were subdued. The people the British feared most, the Maasai, had recently been affected by outbreaks of smallpox. Their notoriously fierce army, composed of young warriors known as *moran*, had been reduced to an ineffective force that was unable to challenge the British. As a result, treaties that limited them to a much smaller area than they had previously controlled were sufficient to subdue them.

The cost of building the railway was substantial and the British Government wanted it to pay for itself. It was uneconomical to build the railway simply to ship goods from one end to the other. So to reduce costs and increase use along the line, the British administration gave out land grants, encouraging Europeans to move to Kenya and settle lands set aside for them. These were areas in the Highlands and the Rift Valley formerly occupied by African people. To facilitate export of crops from East Africa, the British built a railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria using laborers brought from India (Photo 32). This is the origin of the large Kenyan Asian population.

To achieve the settlement of Europeans, the Colonial Government also set aside land for each of the African people. These were far smaller (and often agriculturally unproductive) than the area they had formerly occupied. These areas were popularly referred to as Native 'reserves'. Further, the lands set aside for European settlement were of higher agricultural productivity. As a result the Africans lost not only land, but also often the best of their lands.



Photo 32: Passenger railway train traveling from Nairobi to Mombasa

The consequences of the colonial partitioning of Kenya's land areas between different groups of people have dominated the last 50 years of Kenya's history. The "Land Question" was the basis for the insurgency and political unrest that led to independence and even today the issue is so important that it affects the economy, the political system, and peoples' everyday livelihood.