

# IDAS VALLEY AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF THE CAPE WINELANDS (SOUTH AFRICA)

## (IDAS VALLEY, UN EXEMPLE DU PAYSAGE CULTUREL DES VIGNOBLES DU CAP, AFRIQUE DU SUD)

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Idas Valley is a rural area in the Stellenbosch district of the Western Cape province of South Africa. It is a particularly fine example of the broader regional cultural landscape known as the Cape Winelands – a characteristic combination of striking natural features and human adaptations. With the active participation and management of the landowners, Idas Valley has been protected as a heritage site since 1976.

Idas Valley is clearly defined as a distinctive *place* by its topography. Backed by the towering Simonsberg mountain (1 390m) in the north east, the south-facing valley floor is enclosed on each side by lower hills. Within this clear and defining framework, the valley topography is complex. The mountain and hills are intricately folded and eroded by winter streams that rush off the steep slopes and springs that continue to seep through the hotter months, feeding the tributaries of the Kromme (“crooked”) River which arises in the valley. There are thus a great variety of hills and sub-valleys, humps and hollows with differing orientation, soil types and micro-climates. Part of the fynbos biome, the mountain, valley and hills support a great diversity of flora and fauna. The valley is a “many-placed place” with numerous sub-areas of distinctive character. The interaction of people with this natural landscape over a long period has resulted in the formation of a cultural landscape that is itself complex and varied.

Stone artefacts found in the valley indicate that it has been a human habitat for at least 700 000 years. From about 500 AD Khoi pastoralists inhabited the South Western Cape, moving their herds around seasonally to ensure sufficient grazing for their cattle. When colonial settlement first took place in the 17th century the Stellenbosch area was part of the regular transhumance pattern of two groups of Khoi, the Gorachochqua and the Goringhaiqua. The Khoi burnt patches of bush at their grazing grounds in order to clear the tall, impenetrable fynbos and stimulate the growth of fresh grasses. When colonial agriculturalists first inhabited the valley in 1682, displacing the Khoi in the process, it is highly likely that they used these established clearings and routes as the basis for their dwellings and fields.

The Cape was established by the Dutch East India Company as a way station to the east. The Company initially discouraged colonial settlement but, unable to produce sufficient food itself, the Company soon began to grant land to “free burghers”, retaining tight control over production, marketing and contact with the indigenes. The fledgling settlement at the Cape was an amalgam of diverse people – various Europeans (Company employees and free burghers), slaves and “free blacks” from Mozambique and other parts of Africa, Madagascar, and the East Indies, and a few highly educated rulers and religious leaders from the East Indies who were banished to the Cape as political prisoners along with criminal *bandieten*. These people lived together in intimate conditions in an alien and hence threatening environment, forging a new “creole” culture with a distinctive language, cuisine, crafts and architecture.

The Khoi were officially excluded and segregated from this society, but it is clear from historical accounts that they began to be integrated from the earliest period – while remaining deeply mistrusted and denigrated.

Stellenbosch, established by Governor van der Stel in 1679, was the first “colonial” expansion beyond the Cape Peninsula to be sanctioned by the Company. Thereafter, continued expansion into the hinterland by colonists pushed the Khoi pastoralists (already decimated by foreign diseases) further and further from their traditional grazing lands and ultimately destroyed their way of life.

Idas Valley, which had three farmsteads by 1682, is an exemplar of the patterns and processes of colonial adaptation and development that have formed the Cape Winelands landscape that we know today. Among significant features and characteristics of the valley are the following:

- The magnificent natural setting, comprising dramatic mountain wilderness, rolling hills and gently sloping valley lands, streams and springs, gravelly and rich alluvial soils, and associated diverse flora (fynbos) and fauna.
- Evidence of human landscape modifications and patterns of land use over a long period. Farming activities have responded to the particular conditions in the different sub-areas of the valley (slope, hydrology, orientation, etc), as well as to external factors such as economic changes and technological advances. Changes in the Idas Valley landscape are associated with many of the significant historical factors that have affected productive agriculture in the Cape, such as the slave-labour based expansion of agriculture, the economic boom in the 19th century resulting from favourable wine tariffs under English rule, the freeing of the slaves in 1834 and their assimilation into society as an exploited labour force, the near-collapse of the rural economy after the 1890s phylloxera outbreak that destroyed the Cape vines, the subsequent development of the export fruit industry and improvement of wine quality, and the impact of better dam-building techniques after World War II. The broad patterns of the rural landscape at present are: indigenous bush on the steep mountain slopes, forestry (gums and various pines) on steep hillsides, vineyards and orchards with associated windbreaks of exotic trees on the elevated cultivatable slopes, and pastures and fodder crops for the Rustenschoon dairy herd on the valley floor.
- Remnants of the pioneer transport and communication network. The earliest road between the emerging villages of Stellenbosch and Franschhoek ran through the valley and over the pass known as “the Hell” (from the Afrikaans *helling*, indicating the steep gradient). The origin of this route was most likely a Khoi cattle path. The name Helshoogte was transferred to a new pass built in the 1890s, which bypassed the valley. Since then, Idas Valley has been a cul de sac, which has shielded it from the great pressure for development along through-routes in the Winelands.
- Significant Cape farmsteads. The oldest in the valley – Ida’s Valley, Rustenburg and Schoongezicht –are justifiably celebrated as superb examples of their type and period. The pioneer dwellings were simple longhouses, built of available materials and located on the valley floor close to streams (remnants survive on some farms), with a kraal (walled enclosure) to protect stock at night. Later, during prosperous times in the early 19th century, houses were extended and outbuildings such as wine cellars added, buildings were elaborated with gables, and farmsteads were extended to command the land and impose geometry on the dramatic natural wilderness of their setting (e.g. the oak avenue at Rustenburg). Cape architecture is a tangible expression of the varied cultural influences and combined skills of the diverse people who inhabited the region in the colonial period, and their response to the natural setting.

- A significant, layered sequence of networks for the capture and distribution of water (not yet fully researched), associated with the development of colonial settlement and agricultural production, and demonstrating natural resource use and technological advances through time. These networks span the entire colonial period, including remnants of ancient stone-lined channels for gravity irrigation and domestic water supply, 19th century irrigation piping made of timber, early 20th century capped springs and dams built from the 1930s with newly introduced caterpillar tractors. The current overlay of micro-jet irrigation and a major regional water pipeline demonstrates the continuing evolution of water use and distribution.
- Dwellings and farmsteads of the 19th and 20th centuries (Schoongezicht cottage, Glenbawn, Glenelly, Kelsey, and the cluster of smallholdings known as the "Wedges"). These are of historical and cultural interest, reflecting the ongoing evolution of the practice of agriculture in the valley and patterns of dwelling in this particular rural landscape. Dwelling sites are close to streams (or constructed water channels) and are consequently "tucked in" to the folds of the landscape, often looking out over the valley. There are very few extant vernacular workers' houses in the valley: workers on the biggest farms were rehoused in modern, serviced villages at the height of the apartheid era to avoid possible criticism by overseas importers – itself an illustration of changing labour practices and shifts in South African society in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The social history of the landowners of the valley is fairly well documented, and includes individuals and inter-related families who were influential in the development of the Cape – and in the late 19th and early 20th century, in the political affairs of the country (e.g. John X Merriman, Minister of Finance and of Agriculture in the cabinet of Cecil Rhodes, and highly influential in the massive agricultural transformations of the time; Thomas Smartt, Colonial Secretary, Commissioner of Public Works, leader of Unionist Party, Minister of Agriculture; Hon CP de Villiers, later 2nd Baron de Villiers, whose father was first Chief Justice of South Africa). Typically, the history of the workers on whom the elite depended has not been studied adequately to date, although there are undoubtedly families whose relationship with the place are even more longstanding than that of the successive owners.

At a key point in time, when modernism began to destroy large swathes of the rural landscape and Idas Valley was threatened by increasing subdivision and the expansion of the town of Stellenbosch, the landowners had the foresight to lobby for its protection. The valley, consisting of 21 farms and smallholdings, was declared a national monument in 1976 – the first time the protection of a whole rural environment had been attempted. It has been carefully managed ever since, with the active participation and custodianship of the owners.

Idas Valley is currently facing new threats: the local authority owns a prominent part of the valley which is not protected, and its development as a housing estate is repeatedly mooted; there is increasing pressure to convert smaller farms to commercial and touristic enterprises (there is already a health resort in the valley); as a provincial heritage site under new heritage legislation, the valley is affected by the lack of capacity and operative management systems in the provincial heritage authority. However, new opportunities are also apparent. The landowners are increasingly involving their workers in decision-making, and are actively assisting and empowering previously disadvantaged residents of the neighbouring township to participate in discussions about the future of the area.

Idas Valley is thus exemplary not only as a Cape Winelands landscape which is relatively undamaged by the ravages of modernist development, but as a model for participative heritage management in similar circumstances. Consensus is growing that the Cape Winelands is a very significant cultural landscape and that Idas Valley, which is already a protected heritage site, could appropriately form the core of a potential World Heritage Site representing that unique manifestation of shared colonial heritage.

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