

Merino Sheep at Diamant – The introduction of wool-bearing sheep at the Cape

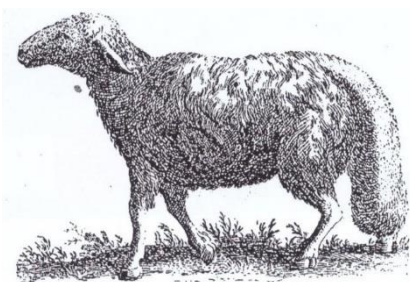
The sheep herded by the local Khoi people, were primarily kept for their meat. They did not produce long woollen hair, even when interbred with Dutch sheep. The first proper wool-bearing sheep came to the Cape in 1789. The “Hollandsche Maatschappij tot Nut van’t Algemeen” privately presented Colonel Robert Gordon with two Spanish merino rams and four ewes. He kept them on the government farm, Groenekloof, in Mamre, where they multiplied and were interbred with the available wool sheep at the Cape. Gordon committed suicide in 1795 during the British take-over, and his sheep were sold to various farmers. Gordon’s widow sold 32 sheep to English Captains on route to Australia. These sheep were the ancestors of the great Australian wool sheep stocks.

The Van Rheenen brothers (of Bredasdorp) had obtained three stud rams, and interbred them with 300 Cape ewes. The hybrid wool-sheep were specified as “Spaansche/ wolgevende schapen”. Most of these sheep were then sold from Bredasdorp. The 70 wool-bearing sheep that Botha had obtained when he bought Diamant farm, may have been brought there by Adriaan van Rheenen, who owned Diamant between 1789 and 1793. He may have sourced them from family in Bredasdorp.

When the northern barn was built at Diamant, as the new wine cellar, the wine casks were removed from the southern barn. The sheep were then kept in this barn for their shearing. The western and southern interior walls, and the low walls which supported the casks, have a dark, shiny patina, as the sheep, with their oily woolskin, rubbed against the brick and clay-plastered walls over many years.

The sheep shearers also scraped grooves into the plaster of the interior walls with sheep scissors, in patterns and groupings which make up 60 sets, and over 569 sheep shorn over the years. Most of the markings are located close to the coach doors at the western end of the barn, where the light conditions would have been better. Sheep were kept and shorn well into the 19th century. The neighbouring farms, such as Blomkool (Fairview) also bred merinos.

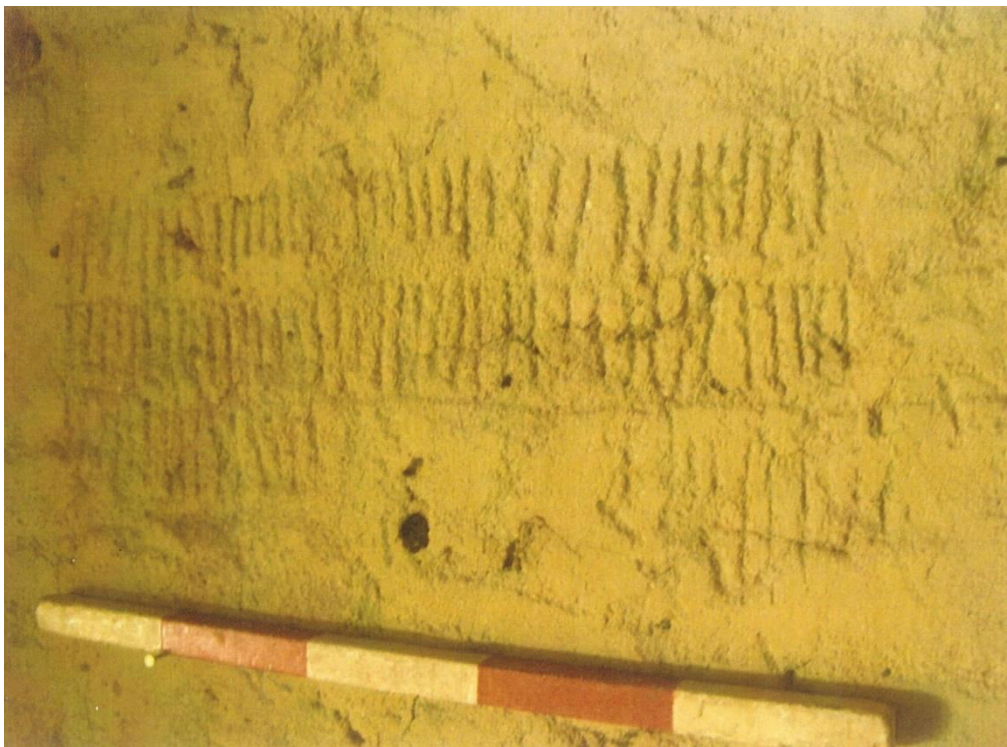
(Reference: Archaeologist, Hennie Vos: Historical Survey and Structural & Archaeological Investigations of the Historic Buildings of Diamant, 2010)



“Vetstertskaap”, the local breed of sheep herded by and bartered from the indigenous peoples.



Wool-bearing Merino Sheep



Sheep shearers' markings on the walls inside "The Chapel"