

THE MFECANE/DIFAQANE (Destroyed in total war)

One of the most significant historical events occurring in the early history of South Africa was the Mfecane. The term Mfecane (Nguni languages) means “destroyed in total war”. The Sotho speaking people on the highveld used the term Difaqane, which means “hammering” or “forced migration/removal”. This occurrence forever changed the settlement patterns and ethnic structure of the African population of the area.

Whole communities of peoples were displaced in their flight from larger warring tribes. The winning tribes would often incorporate the losers into their tribes. Two key figures in this all-out battle for power among the African tribes in southern Africa were Dingiswayo (leader of the Mthethwa tribe) and Zwibe (leader of the Ndandwe tribe).

Din ***giswayo***

When Dingiswayo became leader of the Mthethwa, his main concern was to improve the military system of his tribe. Young men of a similar age were divided into regiments. Each regiment had its own name, colour and weapons. The young men were even required to remain celibate until such a time when they had proven themselves worthy of the name “warrior”. Dingiswayo’s army soon went from strength to strength and was employed in an attempt to expand his territory. The army attacked smaller tribes which were allowed to continue their existence as tribes, but only if they agreed to recognise him as their paramount chief. Some of the tribes which were dominated in this way were the Thembu, Qwabe, Mshali Mngadi and the Zulu.

Shaka

The Zulu tribe was initially a small tribe which recognised Dingiswayo as its paramount chief. The tribe consisted of approximately 2 000 people and its tribal chief was Senzangakona. Shaka, his son, was born in around the year 1787. Shaka and his mother Nandi could not get along with some of the other members of the Zulu family and went to live with Nandi’s family, among the Lungeni people. When Shaka was 16, his mother took him to the Mthethwa and, at the age of 22, he became a soldier in one of Dingiswayo’s regiments.

He was brave and intelligent and soon became leader of one of the regiments. When Senzangakona died in 1816, Sigujane, a half-brother of Shaka, became chief of the Zulu. Shaka, together with another half-brother Ngwadi, plotted against Sigujane, who was soon murdered. With a regiment borrowed from Dingiswayo, Shaka made himself chief of the Zulus.

Shaka was an exceptional military leader and organised the Zulu army with military precision. All the men younger than forty were divided into regiments, based on their age. Shaka built his capital at Bulawayo and, although he recognised Dingiswayo as paramount chief, started incorporating smaller tribes into the Zulu nation.

In 1819, when war broke out between the Ndwandwe and Mthethwa, Dingiswayo was killed by Zwide, after which the defeated Mthethwa tribe was incorporated into Shaka's tribe. In time, Shaka destroyed the Ndwandwe tribe completely

He employed cunning military techniques such as the following: when Zwide sent the Ndwandwe to attack Shaka, the latter hid the food and led his people and cattle further and further away from the capital. Zwide's army followed and Shaka's soldiers waited until night fell to attack them, when they were exhausted and hungry. The Ndwandwe army turned back, after which Shaka attacked and destroyed them. A second attempt was made by Zwide later in 1819 to destroy Shaka, but once again the Ndwandwe had no luck. After this attempt, Shaka ordered the complete destruction of the Ndwandwe people. Shaka went on destroying several smaller tribes until Natal was practically depopulated.

The Zulu eventually grew into a mighty nation when Shaka succeeded in uniting all the people in his chiefdom under Zulu rule. In 1828, two of Shaka's half-brothers, Dingane and Mahlangane, murdered him and Dingane took his place as leader of the Zulu nation.





Dingane

Dingane's capital was built at Umgungundlovu. He was not as good a soldier as Shaka and this caused his defeat in many of his wars. In order to combat the decline of the Zulu kingdom, Dingane decided to kill a few important leaders. One of these leaders, Ngeto (of the Qwabe tribe), realised that his life was in danger and, after gathering his people and livestock, fled southwards and settled in the Mpondo district, from which he himself started to attack other tribes.

Dingane soon sent soldiers to fight the Mpondo people but he also launched attacks against Mzilikazi and the Voortrekkers.

On 3 February 1838, Dingane's tribesmen killed Piet Retief, together with 67 of his followers, during an ambush. Retief had had an agreement with Dingane that if he succeeded in returning Dingane's cattle that had been stolen by Sikonyela, the Voortrekkers would be allowed to buy land from the Zulu. When the Voortrekkers returned with the stolen cattle, they were killed.

The Voortrekkers swore vengeance and Dingane's army was defeated at Blood River on 16 December 1838 by Andries Pretorius. Dingane's death brought with it an end to the extermination wars waged by the Zulus. However, in other parts of the country, the Mfecane continued under leaders such as Msilikazi, Soshangane and Sikonyela.

Mzilikazi

Another small Nguni tribe that was forced to join Zwide's Ndwandwe tribe was called the Khumalo. The Khumalo tribe was suspected of treachery during the war against Dingiswayo's Mthethwa and its leader, Mashobane, was summoned to Zwide's kraal and killed. Zwide appointed Mzilikazi as the new leader of the Khumalo. He was an intelligent leader who knew how to gain the trust of the tribes that had been incorporated into his own. Trouble started when Mzilikazi began to suspect that Zwide wanted to kill him. In preparation, Mzilikazi formed an alliance with Shaka, who allowed him to be the leader of one of his regiments.

In 1821, Mzilikazi felt strong enough to become independent. Shaka sent him to attack a small Sotho tribe northwest of Zululand and, as always, he brought back with him a number of cattle taken during the battle. However, this time he did not hand them over to Shaka as he had done before. When Shaka sent his messengers to collect the cattle, Mzilikazi refused to return them. After this, he was attacked by Shaka's army and had no option but to flee with his people.

Mzilikazi trekked northwards with his people until he reached the Olifants (Elephants) River. He was now in the territory of powerful Sotho tribes, which he attacked, taking their women, children and livestock. He attacked tribes as far as Tswanaland and overpowered them by the military tactics perfected by the Zulu people. His tribe eventually became known as the Matabele.

Mzilikazi decided to trek to the central Transvaal and he eventually settled in the vicinity of what is today known as Pretoria. He moved because he needed to put even more distance between himself and Shaka and he was also in need of more grazing land. After this move, his tribe became even more bloodthirsty.

When the Voortrekkers came on the scene in 1836, Mzilikazi once again went on the attack. At Vegkop, the Voortrekkers succeeded in defeating the Matabele, but they lost all their cattle. In 1837, the Voortrekkers once again succeeded in defeating the Matabele at Mosega and the Voortrekkers, under the leadership of Potgieter, recovered some of their stolen cattle. The Matabele then moved away only to be defeated by the Zulu. In an attempt to get away from his enemies, Mzilikazi crossed the Soutpansberg Mountains and the Limpopo River into which is today known as Zimbabwe. He died in 1868.

Soshangane

After the tribes of Zwide, Soshangane, Zwangendaba and Nxaba, had been defeated by Shaka, they fled to Mozambique. There, they destroyed the Portuguese settlement at Delagoa Bay.

As the Mfecane continued, the land was devastated and tribes were attacked. Much damage was done. Soshangane's capital was near the modern day Maputo and Shaka attacked him here in the campaign that cost Shaka's life. Soshangane then moved on to Middle Sabie and settled near Zwangendaba and his people.

The tribes of Soshangane and Zwangendaba coexisted in harmony until 1831, when they went to war. Zwangendaba had to flee before Soshangane, after which Soshangane, went on to attack Nxaba, who responded by fleeing with his followers to the present-day Tanzania. With Soshangane's biggest enemies out of the way, he began building his Gaza Kingdom. From his capital, Chaimite, soldiers were sent in all directions to attack other tribes. Even the Portuguese were forced to accept him as paramount chief. His kingdom stretched from the Zambezi to the Limpopo Rivers and his army resembled that of the Zulus in its military strategies. As Soshangane grew older, he began to believe that the Matshangano had bewitched him. In retaliation, he attacked them and many fled to the Transvaal where their descendants still live today. Soshangane died around the year 1826.

Mmantatise

During the early 19th century, two of the biggest Nguni tribes, the Hlubi and the Ngwane, lived near the present-day Wakkerstroom. The Hlubi was under the leadership of Mpangazita and Matiwane was the leader of the Ngwane. The Zulus had forced these two tribes across the Drakensberg Mountains into Sotho territory, which meant the start of the Mfecane for the Sotho tribes.

The first tribe to be attacked was the Batlokwa. The tribe's chief had just died and his successor, Sikonyela, was still too young to rule. His mother, Mmantatise was a strong leader and ruled in his place. After the Hlubi tribe defeated the Batlokwa, they took to wandering around and attacking other tribes and tribes such as the Bafokeng were forced to flee. The Batlokwa eventually settled at Butha-Buthe, a mountain stronghold.

Sikonyela

Moshweshwe was living on the mountain with his small tribe and after repeatedly attacking Mmantatise, Moshweshwe's tribe moved to Peka. There they continued the Mfecane and defeated the Hlubi. Sikonyela was by now old enough to lead the Batlokwa in battle and, in 1824, they made another attempt to reconquer Moshweshwe's mountain stronghold at Butha-Buthe. The mountain was surrounded in order to stop the Sotho people from obtaining food. After two months, a Nguni tribe came to Moshweshwe's rescue and the Batlokwa were forced to leave. The Batlokwa subsequently went to settle on two other mountains. In 1852, Moshweshwe finally drove the Batlokwa away.



Sikonyela

Moshweshwe

Moshweshwe, the builder of the Sotho empire, was born in 1793. His mother belonged to the Bafokeng tribe and his father was chief of the Bakwena tribe. When the Mfecane began in 1816, Moshweshwe was 23 years old. During the early years of his chieftainship, leaders such as Shaka, Dingane and Mzilikazi were waging the destructive wars of the Mfecane. Many of the people who got caught up in these wars turned to Moshweshwe for refuge. He took them all in and his tribe grew bigger and stronger. In 1823, Moshweshwe established Butha-Buthe as the capital of his chiefdom. A year later, he established a safer stronghold at Thaba Bosigo. This mountain stronghold was so secure that when Mzilikazi attacked it in 1831, he had to turn back without accomplishing anything.

Moshweshwe was a diplomatic and powerful leader and was too clever to try to expand his territory northwards because he knew that this would incur the wrath of strong leaders such as Mzilikazi, Shaka and Dingane.

*Consequences of the
Mfecane/Difaqane*

The Mfecane had a great influence on the history of South Africa. Large parts of the country in Natal, the Transvaal and Free State were largely depopulated because people fled in droves to safer areas such as the Transkei, the edge of the Kalahari, the Soutpansberg and the present-day Lesotho. In consequence, these areas could not cope with the sudden influx and became overpopulated.

After the Mfecane, the Black peoples were living in an area shaped like a horseshoe. The Tswana and Pedi lived in the west and the Venda, Shangaan, Tsonga and Swazi lived in the north. The Zulu lived in the eastern part of the country, as did the Sotho and the inhabitants of both Transkei and Ciskei.



The whites took advantage of this situation by moving into the empty areas and in this way the ethnic map of South Africa was changed completely.

Many people died during the Mfecane. Violence and starvation were rampant, because the livestock was stolen and people could not stay long enough in one place to cultivate crops. Although hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, it also gave rise to the formation of big new nations such as the Sotho. The tribes of leaders such as Dingane, Shaka, Mzilikazi and Soshangane were significantly strengthened and changed.