

The history of mining in the Barberton greenstone belt, South Africa, with an emphasis on gold (1868 – 2011)

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Although gold was known in various parts of southern Africa prior to 1868 it was only after the De Kaap Goldfields were discovered around 1882 that South Africa became a significant destination for gold prospectors from around the world. Alluvial gold was first found in streams draining the eastern escarpment regions and this was followed eastwards into the malarial- and sleeping sickness-infested Lowveld. Lode gold discoveries in the Makonjwa Mountains led to the founding of the town of Barberton in 1884 and the recognition of the Barberton Goldfields as an important source of the precious metal. The colourful early history of the gold discoveries in the Archaean volcano-sedimentary successions of the Barberton greenstone belt, which straddles South Africa and northwest Swaziland, is outlined with reference to historic photographs depicting early mining activities in the district. The resourcefulness of the intrepid pioneers who prospected this hostile region and who subsequently set the stage for the discovery and development of the Witwatersrand Goldfields from 1886 onwards is recounted. Despite gold being the principal target of the early pioneers, other mineral discoveries were made that contributed to the Barberton greenstone belt being regarded as a favourable mineral exploration region. These included the discoveries of significant chrysotile asbestos, iron ore, magnesite, talc and barite deposits as well as some occurrences of unusual semi-precious commodities such as verdite and buddstone. Gold mining has continued uninterrupted up to the present day – a period of close on 130 years. New discoveries are still being made and old deposits are being re-investigated as techniques of mining and extraction improve. These developments and the recent discovery of a nickel-sulphide deposit associated with an old talc mine suggest that mining activities in the Barberton greenstone belt are set to continue well into the foreseeable future.