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Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape

Ancient Civilisation

By Sian Tiley-Nel

Southern Africa has intrigued and baffled people outside Africa for many centuries. Early European travelers and cartographers saw it as a mysterious and savage place and called it “Darkest Africa”. They did not know that over a thousand years ago the central Limpopo Valley of southern Africa was the hub of trade networks with, among others, China and India.

It was here at Mapungubwe, on the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers, that a veritable melting pot of Iron Age Bantu-speaking farmers and Stone Age hunter-gatherers brought light to this ‘dark continent’ by means of their advanced economic, social and political structures and deep spirituality.

The remains of this civilization lay forgotten for centuries until discovered a little over eighty years ago. Today the sun rises over the point of Mapungubwe Hill from the very direction of the trade that came from the east coast and sets on the western end, at a secretive access up to its summit.

For about four centuries Mapungubwe was the capital of a strong and wealthy state with several district centres. It represented a pinnacle of achievement in the field of indigenous metallurgy.

The discovery of Mapungubwe finally laid to rest the notions proclaimed for long by mostly white historians and ethnologists that southern Africa was only occupied by black farming groups a few hundred years ago and that they were a primitive people.

Mapungubwe lies on the northern border of South Africa with Zimbabwe and Botswana. It is part of the Mapungubwe National Park of 28 168 ha, which is part of the Transfrontier Conservation Area of almost 600 000 ha, reaching across the borders with Botswana and Zimbabwe. Transfrontier Conservation Areas aim to establish conservation areas across borders in the Southern Africa Development Community to support sustainable economic development, the conservation of biodiversity, regional peace and stability. Today South Africa National Parks is ensuring effective conservation of Mapungubwe's archaeological, cultural and natural landscape, and promoting sustainable tourism to them.

It is not commonly known that the creation of the Mapungubwe National Park is indebted to General Jan Smuts, a botanist, philosopher, holist and scientist, and according to a statement he once made, "only a statesman in his spare time". In 1922 this former prime minister of the Union of South Africa set aside a block of nine farms as the Dongola Botanical Reserve in the northern reaches of the former Transvaal with the aim to study the vegetation and assess its agricultural potential. The Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary was then established as a means of protecting the cultural heritage and wildlife. This initiative was short-lived, because a year after the National Party came into power in 1948, they repealed the Dongola Wild Life Sanctuary Act. Had Smuts succeeded in his efforts to protect the area for its natural and cultural wealth, much would have been saved, particularly the wildlife which were poached and hunted after World War II to the brink of extinction. Today Mapungubwe National Park provides a sanctuary to endangered animals such as elephant, black and white rhinoceros and the wild dog.

Smuts visited Mapungubwe for the first time in 1933 and was so impressed by this remarkable site that he arranged with the University of Pretoria that an Archaeological Air Survey be initiated to further investigate Mapungubwe. The Royal Air Force, established by Smuts himself, undertook the first aerial photographs of the Mapungubwe-Limpopo-Shashe area in August of 1937. This was a pioneering

achievement as it was the first time in South African history that an aerial survey was used for archaeological purposes.

On 8 April 1933, *The Illustrated London News* reported a “remarkable discovery in the Transvaal: a grave of unknown origin, containing much gold-work, found on the summit of a natural stronghold in a wild region.” Mapungubwe’s discovery was reported by the Van Graan family to the University of Pretoria (known then as the Transvaal University College) where a chain of events was set in motion that changed the course of our understanding of our the sub-continent’s prehistory. As a result of the interesting findings, research was conducted and managed by the Mapungubwe Archaeological Committee at the University of Pretoria and it was those pioneering archaeologists who instigated the development of Iron Age studies in South Africa. This archaeological advancement eventually led to Mapungubwe being declared a national monument, thereafter a national heritage site, national park and eventually as world heritage site which culminated in the permanent Mapungubwe Museum at the University of Pretoria.

Our understanding of Mapungubwe is largely derived from the more than 60 000 Iron Age artefacts and Stone Age implements, over 450 rock art sites and over a thousand fossil fragments discovered in the central Limpopo Valley.

The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape is testimony to the human development between AD 900 and AD 1300 at three successive capitals and archaeological sites known as Schroda (AD 900 – AD 1000), K2 or Bambandyanalo (AD 1030 – AD 1220) and Mapungubwe Hill (AD1220 – 1290 AD). A “cultural landscape” is defined by UNESCO as “illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical restraints and/or opportunities presented by the natural environment”.

The rise of Mapungubwe is ascribed to the wealth accumulated from trade in gold, glass beads, cotton, ivory and other metals within the Indian Ocean network, as well as the fertile conditions for agriculture. The fall of Mapungubwe is generally attributed to climatic change – the Little Ice Age of southern Africa started around 1300. The Iron Age communities that once depended on the flowing rivers, floodplains and

ample grazing for their thriving economy could no longer be sustained. The centre of wealth and power now moved further north to the highland plateau – Great Zimbabwe. The Mapungubwe area was not inhabited again for another seven hundred years, thus perhaps protecting the site and keeping it in the realm of legend until its rediscovery.

But long before the black farmers arrived in the Mapungubwe area and long after they left, the region was home to the ancient hunter-gatherers of southern Africa, the San or Bushmen. The only sign today that these people lived here is their intricate rock art, of which many examples can still be viewed in the Mapungubwe National Park.

The actual meaning of 'Mapungubwe' is obscure, with interpretations ranging from 'place of jackals', 'place of venerated stone', 'place of wisdom' to 'place where molten rock flowed'. Mapungubwe Hill is a 300 meter by 30 meter sandstone landmark that rises above the mopani bushveld and dominates the baobab environment that forms the core area of the national park and world heritage site today. The hill lies east-west and reveals a clear view of 360 degrees of the central Limpopo Basin. To the north lies Zimbabwe, to the east Botswana, bisected by the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers, and due south Mapungubwe Hill is flanked by a small hill known as Mapungubanyana or little Mapungubwe.

Mapungubwe's prime years were from 1220 to 1290. Stone walls buttressed the slopes and only royalty occupied the traditional homesteads on the summit. The commoners lived at the base of the hill, known as the Southern Terrace. These people's knowledge of mining, refining and fashioning gold into ornaments and the subsequent trade with countries such as India, China, Egypt and Asia via the Indian Ocean coast were what made this kingdom rich and powerful. The kingdom possessed many thousands of cattle and its people were successful growers of cereal. The king of Mapungubwe ruled over three to four thousand people.

Mapungubwe Hill's sacredness lies in its archaeological wonders, most of them unfortunately under deep deposits of sand, consisting of small stone circles, monoliths, stone platforms, hut floors, stone granaries and, most important of all, a

central royal cemetery. Free standing mortar stones, fragments of original compact red hut floors, stone game boards and rough dry walling on the west and eastern ends marking the ancient entrances are remnants still visible today. Mapungubwe Hill is most sacred for its three richly adorned gold bearing burials (more than 3 kilograms of gold in a single female burial) and its remnants of extensive cultural material. The site is today most famous for the three gold ornaments, a gold rhinoceros, a gold bowl and gold sceptre being the iconic objects of its time, found on top of the hill. The rhino, made of small gold plaques hammered to shape over sculpted wood (the wood has since rotten away), is the oldest known evidence of the use of gold by the indigenous people of southern Africa.

The richness of artefacts from Mapungubwe surpasses that of most Iron Age sites and of any contemporary settlements in southern Africa. Beautifully crafted ceramics, metal adornments and jewellery, Chinese celadon, shell beads, clay figurines, ostrich eggshell beads, cowries, and thousands of imported trade glass beads bear witness to Mapungubwe's wealth and trade a thousand years ago.

The neighbouring village of K2, characterised by its large midden (refuse dump) about a kilometre away to the west, indicated that the inhabitants who had settled here before Mapungubwe were subsistence farmers, raising both stock and crops from around AD 900 to AD 1220. Human remains from various graves in cattle kraals and occupation areas indicate that these Iron Age communities enjoyed a healthy and varied diet.

People were prosperous and kept domesticated humped and humpless cattle, indigenous sheep, goats and dogs. The charred remains of storage huts have also been found, showing that millet, sorghum and wild cotton were cultivated. Traditional daily life is reflected by the crafting of objects created from iron, copper and bone for practical and decorative purposes both for local use and possibly for trade.

Pottery, wood, ivory, bone, ostrich eggshells and the shells of snails and freshwater mussels indicate that many other materials were manufactured or refined and traded with Indian Ocean merchants. Between AD 900 and AD 1300 Mapungubwe and K2 represented the Iron Age Mecca of southern Africa.

“The remains of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape are a remarkably complete testimony to the growth and subsequent decline of the Mapungubwe state, the World Heritage Committee stated in its assessment. “What survives are the almost untouched remains of the palace sites and also the entire settlement areas dependent upon them, as well as two earlier capital sites, the whole presenting an unrivalled picture of the development of social and political structures over some four hundred years.”

Mapungubwe’s natural landscape has outstanding botanical, ecological, geological and palaeontological potential, with a range of vegetation types, karoo fossils and ancient rocks nearly three billion years old. Fossil termite mounds built around trees and remnants of the dinosaur mesospondylus are fascinating clues to the Mapungubwe landscape 175 million years ago. Wind-blown desert dunes of four to five meters high can also be seen as well as a conspicuous dolerite dyke 700 meters north of Mapungubwe Hill which was formed as igneous rock was ejected as molten magma to the earth’s surface.

There’s a bit of everything for visitors at Mapungubwe as a World Heritage Site, from San paintings, Iron and Stone Age settlements to great biodiversity that includes swamps, bushveld, Kalahari sand dunes, riverine forests and grass plains in a relatively small area.