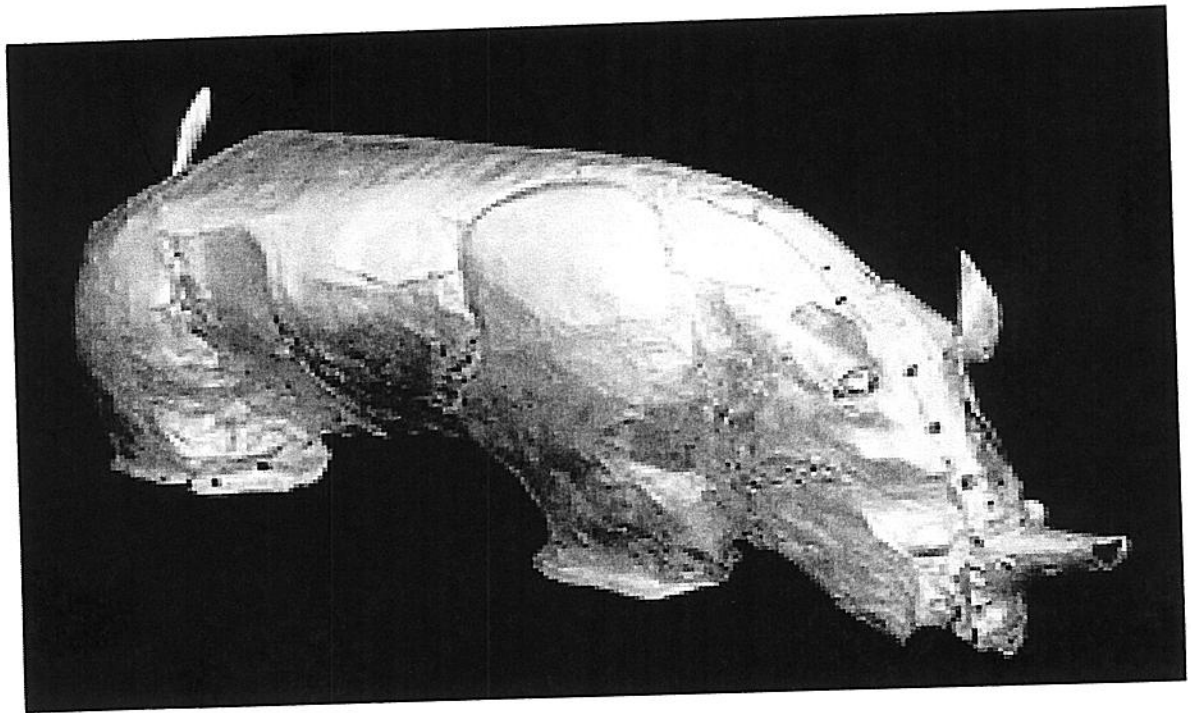


THE KINGDOM OF MAPUNGUBWE:

The first urban centre and the capital of the first state in Southern Africa.

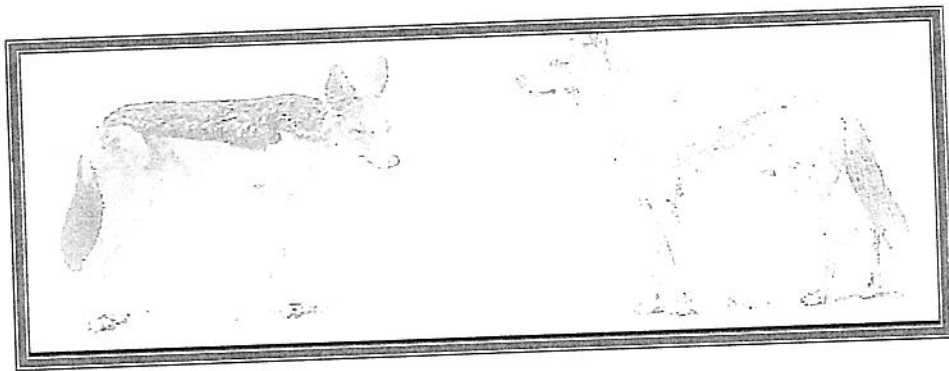


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1. INTRODUCTION.

The word Mapungubwe literally means “a place of (many) jackals”. It is of particular interest to note that the root “-pungubwe” is almost similar in numerous Bantu languages, and it refers to “jackal”. In Venda, this dog-like wild animal is called *phunguwe*, while in Northern Sotho it is called *phukubje*. Probably, there are still such related names in other languages and this clearly confirms the common origins and history of the Bantu-speaking communities. These communities are said to have originated from central Africa and have migrated southwards in different groups, at various times.

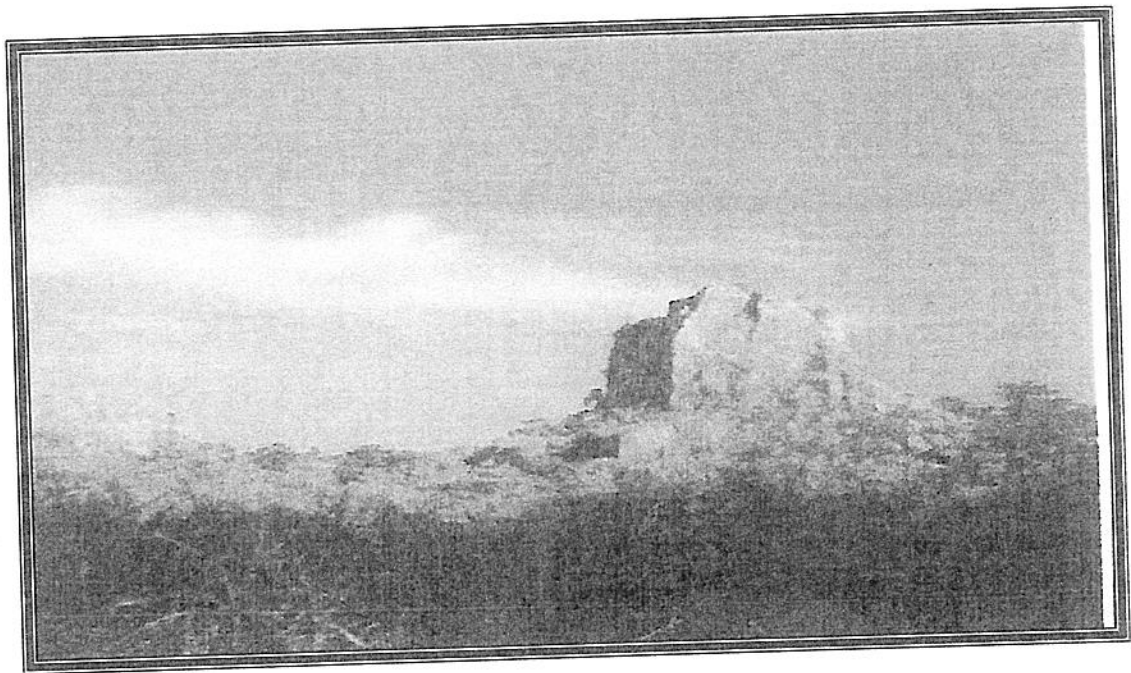


Mapungubwe: the place of many jackals.

There are so many stories about Mapungubwe, some of which are myths, while others are fabrications, distortions and stereotypes. This has been compounded by the fact that the earliest inhabitants of Mapungubwe have unfortunately been unable to keep written records which could be used to represent accurate facts. Just like in other cases of the history of Africa, written records were just taken by foreign (particularly European) explorers, traders, hunters, missionaries, and later the colonial settlers.

Expectedly, these early records-takers wrote from their respective perspectives because each group had its own duties and interests to

serve and further. So it is natural that their records should contain biased information in their favour. For instance, the missionaries wrote bad about the African customs and values such as polygamy, circumcision, etc., because, according to them, all these hindered their mission of spreading the Holy Gospel. It is therefore important that when going through the records on Mapungubwe, the perspectives of various sources should constantly be interrogated.



Hills at Mapungubwe.

2. HISTORY, EARLY INHABITANTS AND WAY OF LIFE.

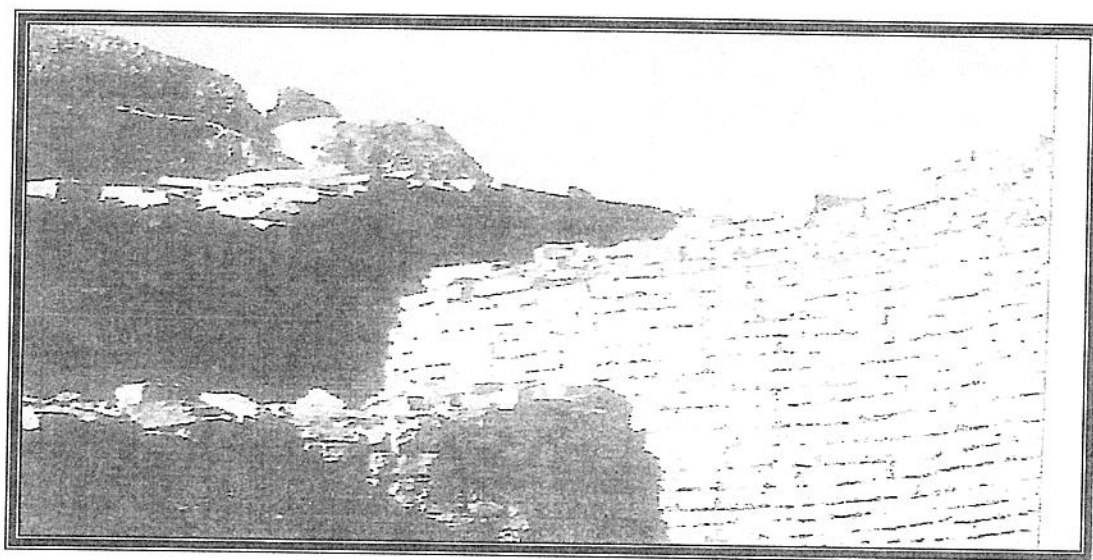
The archaeologists refer to the last 2 000 years in East, Central and Southern Africa as the Iron Age. Various methods are to determine the ways of life during this period. For instance, ceramic styles are used to trace and determine the movements of various communities. The movements of communities were to a large extent influenced by the climatic conditions because the Iron Age communities depended on cultivation and herding. According to independent data (Tyson & Lindesay, 1992), between AD 500 and 700, the interior plateau of Southern Africa was warmer and wetter. However, from about AD 700 to 900 the climate became colder and drier, and as a result, there are no Early Iron Age sites of this time on record in the Limpopo-Shashe valley. The area was only re-settled in about AD 900.

During this second settlement period of the Iron Age, the inhabitants confronted to a settlement organisation known as the Central Cattle Pattern. In this pattern, cattle were a principal form of wealth, man's success, status and power. In these arrangements of unequal distribution of power, men and cattle occupied the central domain while females occupied the central peripheral zone. There is sufficient evidence which suggests that the Limpopo-Shashe basin was the first in the interior to be integrated directly into the Indian Ocean commercial network of the Portuguese and the Arabs.

During the Middle Iron Age, the increase of population in the Limpopo-Shashe basin and the local control of the East coast trade resulted in the intensification of social ranking. People began to amass, and a bureaucratic, class-based society emerged. At Limpopo-Shashe basin a big town emerged with supporting villages. The Central Cattle Pattern was radically transformed and was replaced by what was known as Zimbabwe culture, in which the capital shifted to Mapungubwe and the leader (king) moved to the hilltop, above the court, while the majority of his people lived down below, in which small settlements were inhabited by commoners. This was for the first time in Southern Africa

that a leader was so physically separated from his followers. It was during this period that the upper class developed; settlement organisation and architecture of houses changed; internal arrangement of houses changed; and the palace shielded its own unique structure.

Shortly after the move from K2 to Mapungubwe, the ceramic style began to change. Glass beads and other artifacts indicate the continued contact with coastal traders. The introduction of spindle-whorls at Mapungubwe mark the introduction of weaving by coastal traders and perhaps the start of another craft specialty. The golden artifacts which were later found in the graves on top of the hill indicate that by AD 1250, gold objects were being locally manufactured. Although it is not clear when gold was first discovered, it is evident that by the 13th century, at least, Mapungubwe people were already mining reef gold.



The Mapungubwe kingdom was linked to the Great Zimbabwe.

Judging by the extent of the distribution of the Mapungubwe -pottery, the kingdom's hegemony might have covered 30 000 square kilometer. At its peak in the 13th century, Mapungubwe's own population was probably between 3 000 and 5 000 people, making it the first urban

center and capital of the first state in Southern Africa. The boom of this first town was because of the favourable climate during the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers. The economy was basically subsistence and cattle provided meat diet while the rest of the diet was largely derived from domestic crops which were cultivated on both dryland and flood plains. In about AD 1290 / 1300, the climate throughout Southern Africa appears to have been affected by the spread of Little Ice Age, and it became colder and drier in the interior. As a result, Mapungubwe was abandoned and the entire basin was depopulated in which some of the Mapungubwe people moved into the Soutpansberg. Mapungubwe then disintegrated and Great Zimbabwe became Mapungubwe's economic, cultural and political successor.

It was during the Late Iron Age when Great Zimbabwe was also abandoned. This was in about between 1400 and 1450, and this was probably because of political disputes. Khami, near Bulawayo, became the next major power. It is not clear if the Khami dynasty came from Great Zimbabwe or if a new one had taken over. The various Khami states and chiefdoms were greatly affected by the European arrival in Southern Africa. The Portuguese pursued a policy of divide-and-rule, introducing guns, thus changing the scope of warfare forever. In 1644 the Portuguese participated in a civil war in southwest of Zimbabwe and helped to sack the Khami. The winner probably ruled a new capital, now called Njanja or Regina.

A new royal dynasty, the Rozwi, began a military campaign from the 1680s under Changamire Domolakochingwayo. Their capital was located at Danagombe and after Changamire's death, in 1696, his sons fought for kingship. As a result of this succession dispute, one of Changamire's sons broke away and settled at Wanke, near the Victoria Falls. Another son moved south across Limpopo and founded the Singo chiefdom, with its base in Dzata. Shortly after this time, the centre of the trade shifted south from the Portuguese in central Mozambique, to the English and Dutch at Delagoa Bay. This shift coincided with the rise of the Bapedi and the Nguni as well as the civil war in Venda.

Various Venda settlements are known in the Limpopo-Shashe area, most notably on the Bambandyallo Hill, opposite Mapungubwe. Most of the settlements date to the Mfecane, a period of unrest, and even later. The rock paintings of the fat-tailed sheep suggest that the San hunter-gathers were in the Limpopo-Shashe basin during the Iron Age. Again, excavations in the rock shelters at Little Muck and Balerno, suggest the presence of the San at some point.

3. "DISCOVERING" MAPUNGUBWE.

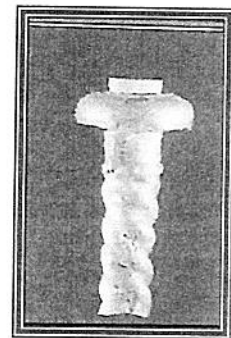
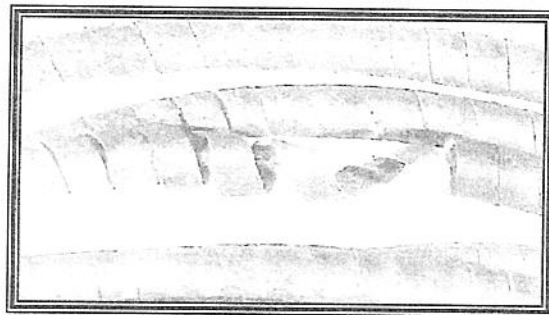
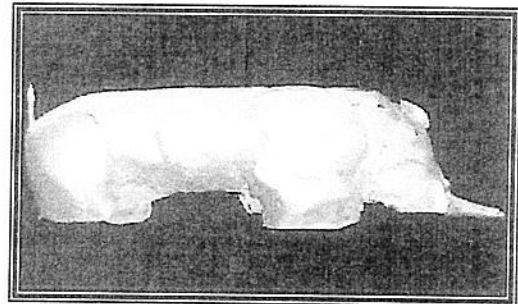
The concept of "discovering" has always been controversial, and even unacceptable to others. For instance, it has always been difficult to understand when some authors wrote that the Europeans such as Vasco da Gama, Bartholomeo Diaz, Jan Van Riebeeck, etc., "discovered" some other parts of Africa. To say that Jan Van Riebeeck "discovered" the Cape is not only historically incorrect, but it is also insulting to the Khoisan and the Xhosa who have been living in that part of the world for time immemorial. Therefore, to say that Mapungubwe was "discovered" in the 1930s by certain Europeans is equally untrue. The findings of African graves in the area means that there were people who lived there, hence they buried their loved ones, and therefore the issue of "discovery" is totally out of question.

As already mentioned, some sources suggest that the Mapungubwe kingdom eventually disappeared completely. It is not certain whether this view was only coined and propagated by the "empty land" theorists who only wanted to justify the Europeans' land occupations. However, regardless of whether this was a distortion or not, eventually the place which once belonged to the kingdom of Mapungubwe was now Greefswald Farm. It must be pointed out that after the Europeans conquered African communities, they confiscated land and did away with Africans' land tenure system, and introduced their private land ownership system, in which farms were cut and given to individuals. By

the time of the “discovery” of valuable artifacts at Mapungubwe, the farm Greefswald was owned by E.E. Collins.

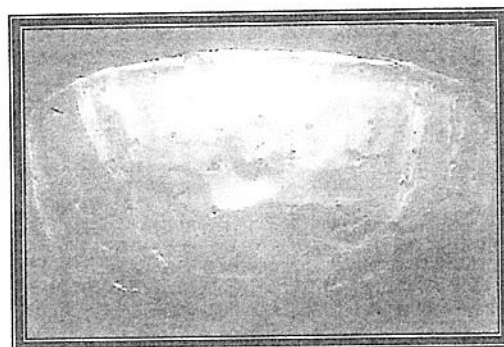
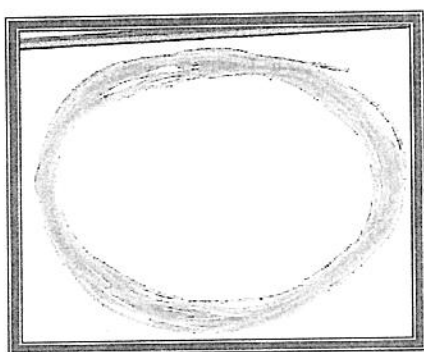
Towards the end of the 1920s there were already rumours in the then Northern Transvaal about the presence of gold in the Limpopo Valley. Fortune seekers began searching for the precious metal. On 31 Dec 1932, a certain Mowena accompanied and guided a local farmer and prospector, E.S.J. van Graan, and his son J.C.O. van Graan to Mapungubwe Hill where they found (not discovered) stone walls, gold artifacts, fragments of iron artifacts, potsherds and glass beads. The following day on 1 January 1933, they found prehistoric remains, including grave goods, among other things, golden rhino, scepter and a bowl.

Some of the golden artifacts found in Mapungubwe were a rhino, a scepter, a bowl and bangles.



4. EXCAVATIONS AND POLITICS.

After finding such treasures in Mapungubwe, J.C.O. van Graan took the news to Professor Leo Fouche, the head of the Department of History at the University of Pretoria. (J.C.O. van Graan himself had previously been a student at UP). The University acted promptly to the news and was determined to secure the newly-found site for research and conversation purposes. The University then proceeded by negotiating excavation rights with the farm owner, E.E. Collins, and also to legally obtain the artifacts found in Mapungubwe. The University was then legally given the possession of "the Mapungubwe treasure, as well as other related information." Further mining, prospecting and related activities were then stopped at Greefswald.



Some golden objects found in Mapungubwe.

To ensure the protection of the newly-found site, the police were even deployed there. The politicians' interests in Mapungubwe were already apparent when the then Prime Minister of White South Africa, J.B.M. Hertzog, authorised the purchase of Greefswald farm in June 1933, with excavation rights monopolised by the UP. The significance of the "discovery" was further emphasised when the Pact Government of Hertzog passed the Preservation of Ancient Monuments Acts in 1934, subsequently establishing the Government Bureau of Archaeology at the University of Witwatersrand. The then prominent white politician in South Africa, General C..J. Smuts, also visited the Mapungubwe in 1934.

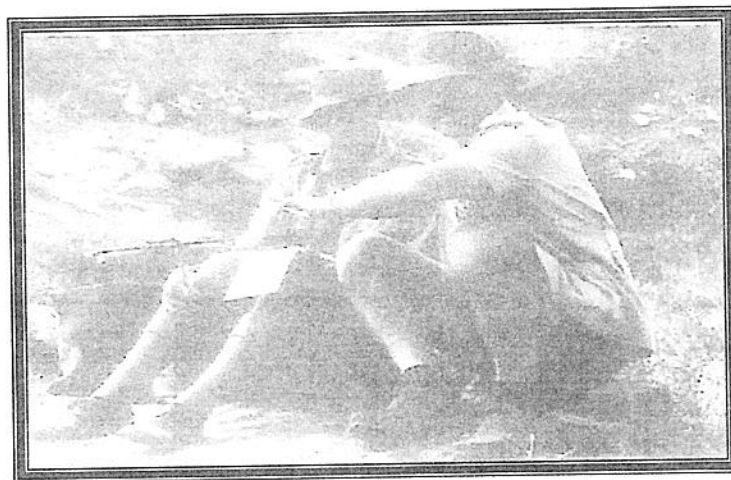


General Smuts visited Mapungubwe in 1934.

Having been given the right of monopoly at Mapungubwe, the UP was again privileged when the then Minister of Interior, J.H. Hofmeyer, constituted the Archaeological Committee in that institution in 1933. The Committee represented the UP, the Government and the public, and it was to supervise future research at Greefswald.

There were other numerous sites of cultural significance which were found around Mapungubwe. Excavations were commenced under the banner: Greenswald Archaeological Project. Excavations were done in phases in which the first one was in the 1930s, followed by the second one in the 1950s and 1960s. The other phase was in the 1970s. After World War II, the UP was able to continue with excavations and in 1961 Archaeology become an independent and specialised subject in the Department of Anthropology at the UP. Mapungubwe become the centre for training new Archaeology students.

Among the first batch of Archaeology students, Andrie Meyer was distinguished as a devoted student, a systematic, organised and neat worker, who was also a good observer and illustrator. The Human Sciences Research Council funded the Mapungubwe project in which Meyer was appointed as Field Work Assistant. Researches on Mapungubwe resulted in specialised reports and dissertations by among others, Meyer, Voigt, Hanisch and Van Ewyk.



Andrie Meyer (left) was a leading student in the early days of research work at Mapungubwe.

5. “DISCOVERING” THE TRUTH ?

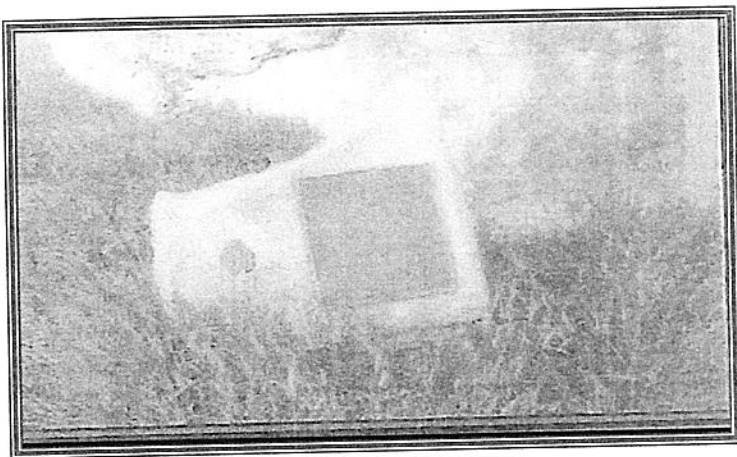
The keen interest expressed by the White Pact Government on the “discovery” of an Archaeological site of a Black kingdom of Mapungubwe is curious. Why did the Government of Hertzog become so much interested in Mapungubwe and immediately authorised the University of Pretoria to monopolise all the activities on the site? Although the only people who could answer this multi-dollar question were Hertzog and his colleagues, there is no doubt that the “discovery” of Mapungubwe somehow affected some beliefs, ideologies and policies propagated by the then White political formations.

One of the principal beliefs which the Europeans held before they came to Africa was that Africa was a dark, backward continent which needed to be “saved”. The Europeans also believed that Africans were unable to dig and process precious metals such as gold. The finding of gold artifacts at Mapungubwe - the gold objects which were manufactured by the Black communities - suddenly exploded the myth that Blacks were technologically incompetent. This badly shook the long-held beliefs of a White man and it was also an embarrassment to those White leaders who

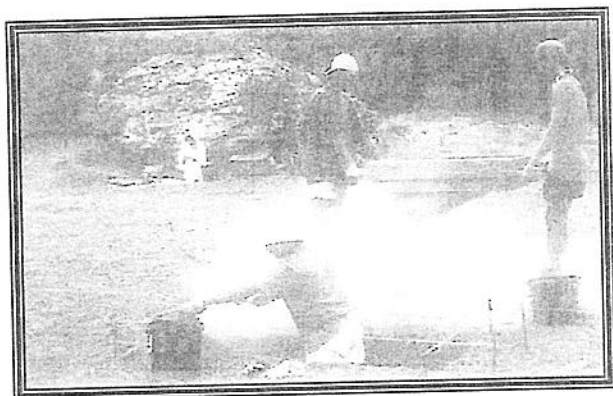
had been constantly reminding their followers of the inferiority of Blacks.

It was against this background that the Government of Hertzog reacted which such promptness by ensuring that the UP was authorised to “hide” Mapungubwe “treasure, as well as other related information.” It is also known that the UP had been a purely Afrikaner institution which was used to sustain White minority rule intellectually, and it was therefore a suitable institution to carry out clandestine research at Mapungubwe. The “protection” of the site by the police as well as the South African Defence Force still show how sensitive the White governments viewed Mapungubwe. However, the presence of these security forces in the Limpopo Valley should also be viewed in the light that by then, the borders between South Africa and its neighbours were strictly supervised to check the opponents of the successive White minority governments, particularly the armed wings of the liberation movements.

Perhaps the truth which still needs to be “discovered” is why did Hertzog’s government take such a special interest in Mapungubwe and why was the UP authorised to hide the “Mapungubwe treasure as well as other related information.”? Perhaps this is one of the areas which still requires further research.



The University of Pretoria marked out Mapungubwe so as to enable the institution to monopolise activities there.



Excavations at Mapungubwe took place under the auspices of the University of Pretoria.

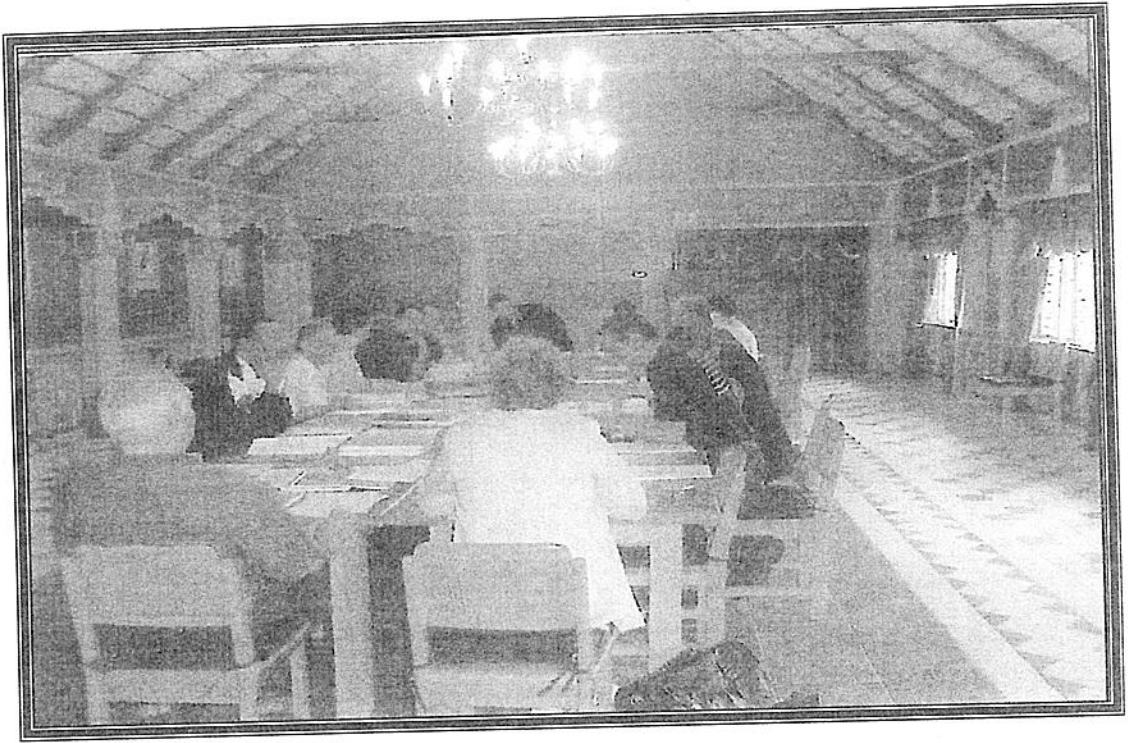
6. MAPUNGUBWE TODAY.

The interest generated by the “discovery” of Mapungubwe marked the site to be of particular importance. As already mentioned, Hertzog’s government promptly reacted in order to “protect” the site and its artifacts through the support of the UP. In the 1980s Mapungubwe was declared a National Monument under auspices of the National Monuments Act of 1969.

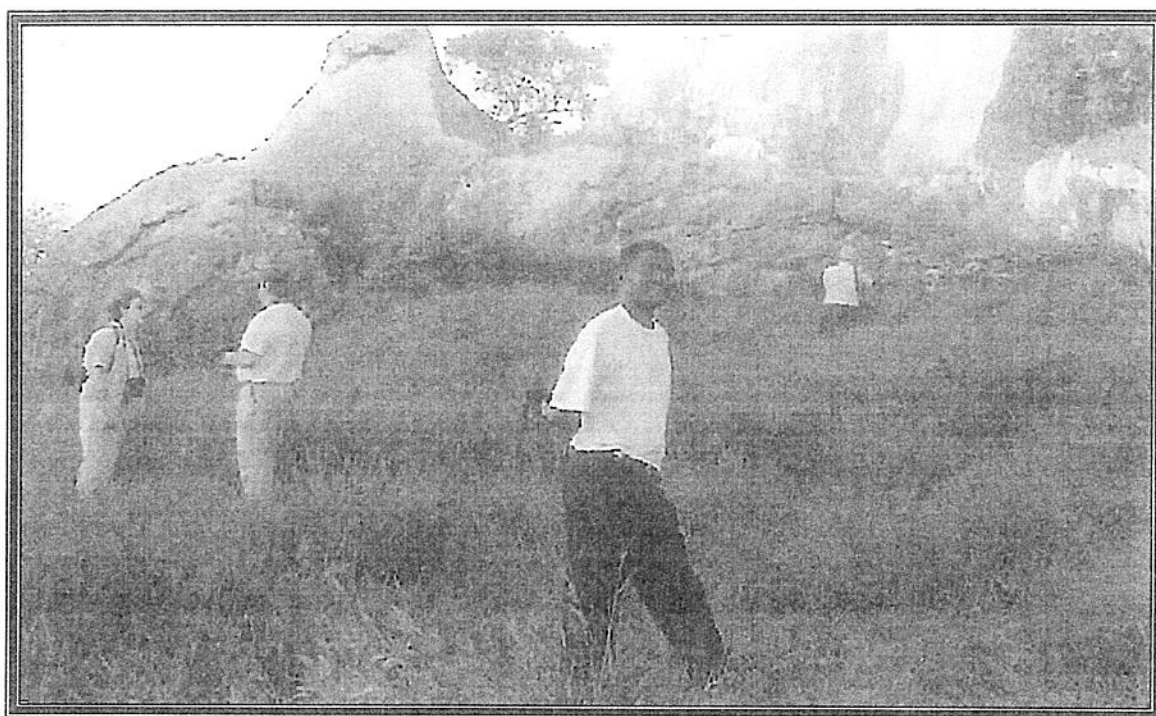
The National Monuments Council was replaced by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) which was established by the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 in order to protect heritage resources. Mapungubwe was recently declared as a National Heritage Site and also qualifies as a World Heritage Site. The core collection of golden objects from Mapungubwe were also proclaimed as National Heritage Objects and they are now part of the SASOL Africa Exhibition and Heritage Programme at the University of Pretoria.

The conservation of Mapungubwe and its importance as a Heritage Site are also enhanced by its strategic location. Mapungubwe is found on the valley of two rivers (Shashe and Limpopo) which are international boundaries between three sovereign countries, viz., South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana. Because of improved relations between

countries, following the end of apartheid, a trans-frontier heritage project is possible. A wonderful view of Limpopo-Shashe confluence could be one of the main tourist attractions in that area.



In November 2001, SAHRA Council declared Mapungubwe as a National Heritage Site. Mapungubwe is also on the list of World Heritage Sites, together with Makapan Valley, Cradle of Humankind and Robben Island.



As a national body charged with managing heritage resources, SAHRA constantly visits sites such as Mapungubwe for supervision, development, etc.

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