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# THE MAPUNGUBWE–GREAT ZIMBABWE RELATIONSHIP IN HISTORY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF STUDIES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL COMPLEXITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper engages with the historiography of the relationship between Mapungubwe (AD 1220–1290) and Great Zimbabwe (AD 1000–1700), two examples of prominent centres of power in precolonial southern Africa. Separated as the sites were by just over 300 kilometres, archaeologists have always sought to establish cultural connections between them. From the discovery of Mapungubwe in 1931 until the late 1970s, it was interpreted as a lesser order settlement under Great Zimbabwe. However, from the early 1980s, Mapungubwe became the cradle of the Zimbabwe culture, with Great Zimbabwe being a secondary offshoot from the former. Still, little regard was accorded to potentially important sites occupying interstitial spaces between Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, while African philosophies on landscape, territories and boundaries were never fully incorporated into any paradigm. Consequently, this exclusionary genesis of existing interpretations mandates that any new work must critically engage with the historiography of the relationship between Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe in order to transform and decolonise the knowledge beyond the 'business-as-usual' approach typical of traditional scholarship of this region.*

Key words: Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, genesis, historiography, African philosophies, decolonisation.

## INTRODUCTION

The Berlin Congress of 1884/5, which crucially created the borders that now separate many African countries, barely considered any of the pre-existing cultural, economic and political affiliations of the different African peoples when demarcating boundaries for the new colonies. Often, borders divided related peoples, while unrelated peoples found themselves within the borders of a new, single colony. The colonies that fell under various European countries, such as Portugal and Britain, had greater ties with the imperial centres of Lisbon and London than with their African continental relatives and neighbours. As an exclusively expatriate affair, archaeology often saw the collaboration of archaeologists working in colonies of the same power, and isolation between archaeologists working in colonies of different powers. Because Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa were under British rule, archaeologists in these territories often realised the necessity of crossing political boundaries in building interpretations. However, they just as often disregarded neighbouring countries, such as Mozambique, which were under the Portuguese.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the British had numerous colonies in southern Africa: South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Nyasaland (Malawi), and Bechuanaland (Botswana) which was a protectorate. The two Rhodesias, Nyasaland and South Africa had a highly interconnected political and economic

history. Cecil John Rhodes, whose British South Africa Company obtained a royal charter to colonise lands north of the Limpopo, was a powerful political figure in South Africa. On learning about Great Zimbabwe, Rhodes was so enchanted that symbols and artefacts from the site came to inspire iconography at his Groote Schuur residence in Cape Town, and among others, the Rhodes House at Oxford University. Given this political importance, Great Zimbabwe and related sites became a focal point for the development of Iron Age (AD 200 to 1900) archaeology in southern Africa.

Conditioned by the region's political history, Iron Age archaeology was until the 1930s, practised mostly by enthusiasts. However, the seeds of the professionalisation of the discipline in British colonies had been sown. The first legislation in Southern Rhodesia was the Ancient Relics Act of 1902, the same year that a museum was established in Bulawayo. In South Africa, the first such Act was the Bushman Relics Protection Act (No. 22 of 1911). From then onwards, developments in South African legislation influenced those in Southern Rhodesia, and in Bechuanaland. The common trend, however, was that the discipline of archaeology was to become fully professionalised by the 1950s. Since museum administrations were in modern towns, most sites that were recorded were around these areas. Furthermore, because archaeology was a European affair, white settler farmers commonly reported sites to the museums. For example, the discovery of Mapungubwe was led by local white farmers, resulting in an active search for sites in the surrounding areas of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. Meanwhile, research was also done in and around Great Zimbabwe, and in areas in proximity to the town of Masvingo. Because sites such as Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe had exciting material for those involved, they quickly imagined connections, some of which became established lore, and yet they never involved African communities in verifying such connections.

By the 1960s and 1970s, Iron Age archaeology was fully professionalised, but the problem of research coverage remained a strong issue. Connections were made between widely separated sites that were archaeologically better known and that were deemed to be important, using a Western value system. Since the early part of the 20th century, archaeologists working in southern Africa have compared notes and, in a number of instances, adopted similar perspectives in the interpretation of the precolonial past of the region. From the end of the 20th century to the present, common themes and personalities have created a fused interpretation of the southern African past.

Since the 1960s, the study of settled communities in southern Africa elicited a common approach because the archaeology was perceived as the work of related Bantu peoples, who typically herded livestock, cultivated various domestic crops,

manufactured iron and copper implements, lived together in permanent villages, and made similar or related ceramics (see Phillipson 2005; Huffman 2014). They are also thought to have shared a common ideology with a typical belief system in a higher God, reached through the intercession of ancestors. Settlement location and settlement patterns were thought to conform to a predetermined model that reflected their Bantu roots. Many archaeologists working in southern Africa therefore look at the Later Iron Age sites in southern Africa as representing signatures of past people who shared a common ideology (Fig. 1). Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe have been subjected to such models, and are believed to have been the work of Shona people, a linguistic group in modern Zimbabwe. The history of research on Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe provides interesting reading, and some of the old debates and perspectives have found their way into the current debate on the origins of the Zimbabwe culture.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MAPUNGUBWE

The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape is a significant site because it is associated with the development of socio-political complexity in southern Africa. The evolution of the state at Mapungubwe was a gradual development, which began during the 11th century to probably the 14th century, and beyond (see Manyanga 2007). Mapungubwe Hill and its treasure were well known to African communities who lived in the area of the Shashe and Limpopo valley. It was regarded as a sacred place by the local African people, and this kept the site intact through a system of taboos and prohibitions associated

with its sacred status. Among the local African communities, the site of Mapungubwe and its treasure remained a well-kept secret as was required by tradition. Early prospecting on the site and disclosure of its treasures is associated with one François Bernard Rudolph Lotrie, whose activities ignited rumours of a forbidden hill with gold (see Fouché 1937; Tiley-Nel 2011). Reporting of the site to the outside world is credited to the Van Graan family, local farmers and prospectors, who in the early 1930s, coerced a local African inhabitant to reveal the location and access to the much talked about ‘hill of gold’. Fouché recounts the ordeal of the unknown young African man:

The native, who was literally shivering with fright and had to be forcibly detained, at last pointed out the secret stairway to the top (Fouché 1937: 1).

After that, the site became victim to prospectors, looters, and antiquarianism (Meyer 1998; Carruthers 2006). The leaders among these was the Van Graan family, father and son, who reported some of the outstanding archaeology of Mapungubwe Hill, but notably failed to declare everything they found.

Systematic research at Mapungubwe is associated with the work of Leo Fouché (1880–1949), who conducted various expeditions between 1933 and 1940 (see Fouché 1937; Meyer 2006). His work was complemented by that of Clarence van Riet Lowe, Neville Jones, and ceramic specialist John Schofield. From then on, the government of the Union of South Africa (1910–1948) began to take a keen interest in the archaeological work at Mapungubwe and regarded it “[...] as a matter of

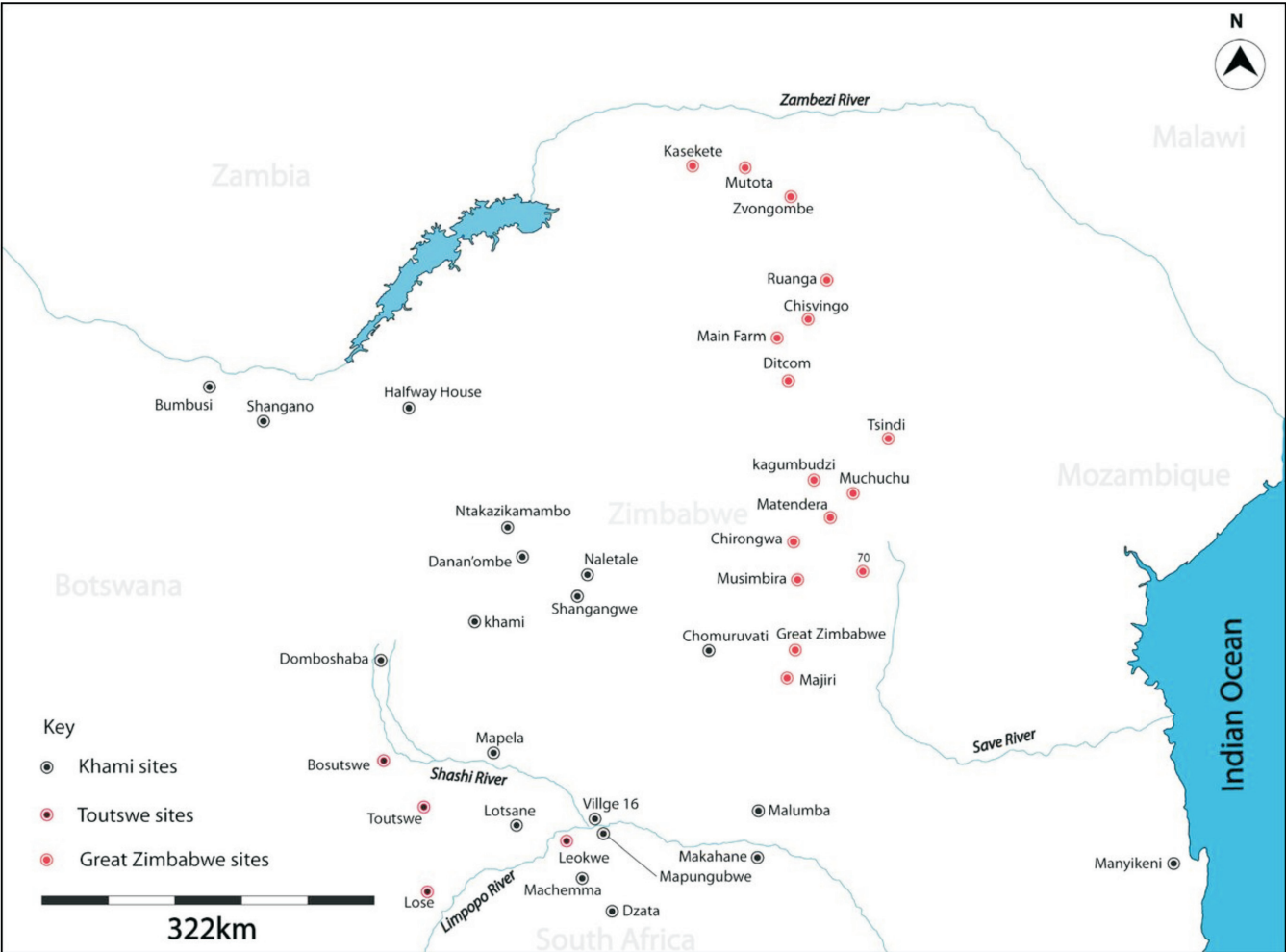


FIG. 1. Zimbabwe and Khami phase sites, some of which are mentioned in the text.

national interest” (Fouche 1937: 6). It became a government project funded under the civil service, where it was supposed to help create a sense of national identity for the emergent South African nation (see Carruthers 2006; Shepherd 2002). The Union government then set up a committee to drive research, and entered an agreement with the University of Pretoria to spearhead the research at Mapungubwe. While the government was intent on having a say about the knowledge and narratives generated by Mapungubwe, the researchers were keen to address what they considered the research question of the time: the antiquity and nature of the ancient ruins period in southern Africa (see Fouché 1937; Galloway 1937; Jones 1937; Schofield 1937). Interestingly, this early research always had a regional scope as it intended to compare Mapungubwe with ruins north of the Limpopo. Jones’ (1937) analysis of artefacts, structures and features demonstrated the Bantu character of the site and its close affinities with Great Zimbabwe. Schofield’s (1937) analysis of ceramics revealed close links with the Zimbabwe ceramics, from which he concluded that Mapungubwe was an outpost of Shona culture but with a fusion of Sotho culture (Schofield 1937: 54). The ethnographic work by Lestrade (1937) saw connections between the African communities in the Shashe–Limpopo basin, such as Shona, Venda, Sotho, Lea, Kalanga, and Thwamamba, as having connections with Mapungubwe. Galloway (1937) struck a different note when his analysis of the skeletal remains erroneously ascribed them to non-Bantu people. The ideas of Fouché and some of his colleagues proved too progressive for the time and it is not surprising that he was subsequently hounded out of his job with the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, culminating in institutionalised apartheid policies after 1948.

Guy Gardner continued with research at Mapungubwe and K2 from 1935 to 1940, and produced the delayed *Mapungubwe Volume II* publication in 1963. He carried out large-scale excavations which resulted in the recovery of graves, large quantities of artefacts, and information about climates in the past. His interpretation of the site changed over

the period, and he finally regarded K2 and Mapungubwe as having been occupied by the Khoë who were later overrun by the Bantu (Gardner 1963: 60). The University of Pretoria continued with research at Mapungubwe until recently. The southern terrace at Mapungubwe was excavated by Sentker and Coertze in 1953 and 1954 (Meyer 1998; Tiley-Nel 2011). Excavations were carried out by Hannes Eloff and Andries Meyer (see Meyer 1998) with a view to establishing stratigraphic sequences at the site. The stratigraphic analysis was complemented by the use of radiocarbon dating. The most recent excavations were conservation related (see Nienaber & Hutton 2003), and these have added to the understanding of the material sequences at Mapungubwe and Bambandyanalo (K2). Today, the Mapungubwe Collection consists of a vast array of material culture excavated over the past 84 years. However, the Mapungubwe material is highly fragmented and is housed at various repositories in South Africa (see Tiley-Nel 2011). Nevertheless, the analysis of these materials has yielded valuable information on subsistence, technology, crafts, trade, and past environments.

Through these years of research, Mapungubwe was investigated and interpreted with little input from local communities. The idea that these communities were descendants of the builders of Mapungubwe, whose knowledge could be utilised in the interpretation of the site and its material culture, was not unknown (see Lestrade 1937). Nevertheless, their role was relegated to providing labour during excavations and conservation work (Fig. 2). Throughout the colonial and apartheid period, local communities became increasingly alienated from their heritage (see Chirikure *et al.* 2010). The post-apartheid era saw local and descendent communities galvanise themselves, and today they are actively involved in activities at Mapungubwe. In 2007, representatives of the Vhangona, Remba and Venda made a successful claim for the return of human remains that had been recovered from Mapungubwe and K2, removed, and for years kept in museums and university laboratories. These remains were reburied in the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape (see Nienaber *et al.* 2008; Nel 2011; Schoeman &



**FIG. 2.** African labourers working on the excavations at Mapungubwe Hill in 1939. (Photograph courtesy of Mapungubwe Archive, University of Pretoria Museums.)

Pikirayi 2011; Pikirayi 2016). Pikirayi (2016) observed that communities were not merely asking for restitution and reburial, but were now demanding socially relevant archaeology, and their own participation in knowledge production. Such demands were also expressed during a recently held community workshop (29 August–3 September 2017) at Mapungubwe, organised by SANParks.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF GREAT ZIMBABWE

Great Zimbabwe is a Wold Heritage Site, acclaimed for its unique artistic and architectural achievements. It represents the remains of a Shona civilisation that flourished between the 11th and 17th centuries. The site consists of the Hill Complex, the Great Enclosure, and the Valley Enclosures (see Fig. 3). During the 16th century, the Portuguese on the east coast of Africa made reference to it as an important economic and political centre. At the time of European contact at the end of the 19th century, Great Zimbabwe was well known to the local inhabitants who, by that time, only utilised it for religious purposes

(see Matenga 2012). The control of the site was so important to the local chiefs that they saw its custodianship worth quarrelling over (see Burke 1969; Fontein 2006). Probably the earliest European to reach Great Zimbabwe was Jan Adam Renders, a German-American hunter and trader who lived at Great Zimbabwe and established a trading post there in 1868. The best known description of Great Zimbabwe was by German geologist Carl Gottlieb Mauch in 1871. Using the prevailing myth and fable of his time, Mauch opined that Great Zimbabwe had been built at the instruction of the Queen of Sheba (Burke 1969). The involvement of Renders and Mauch at Great Zimbabwe has been linked with the collection of several artefacts – and inevitably also theft – as suggested in Mauch’s diaries (see Matenga 2012). In 1891, Cecil John Rhodes commissioned British archaeologist James Theodore Bent to carry out archaeological investigations at Great Zimbabwe. These investigations were meant to prove that Great Zimbabwe had Semitic connections. Indeed, Bent was happy to oblige and echoed Rhodes’ thinking that Great Zimbabwe was not built by

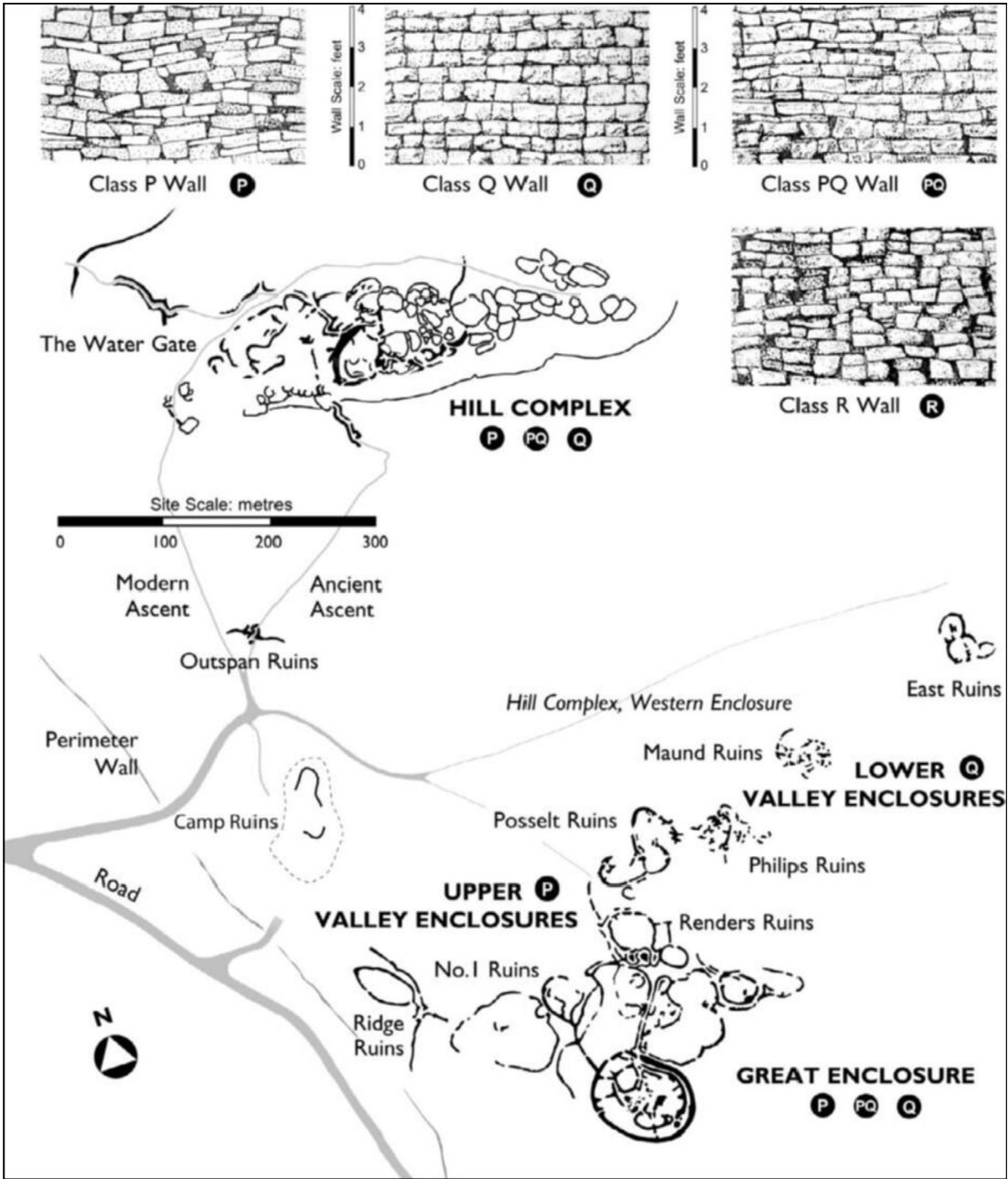


FIG. 3. Plan of Great Zimbabwe showing the various constituent enclosures (after Chirikure, Pollard, et al. 2013).

local Africans. In 1892, the antiquarian John Willoughby carried out surveys and excavations at Great Zimbabwe. He is credited with producing some of the earliest plans of the Great Enclosure, and carried out total excavations in the Valley Enclosures, close to where the site museum is now located.

Great Zimbabwe continued to attract many non-professional – and unprofessional – hands; between 1902 and 1904, Richard N. Hall carried out what he thought was a ‘clean-up’ operation of the monument, clearing it of what he thought was the dirt and debris of the local African occupation. His work is famed for destroying much of the archaeological deposit at Great Zimbabwe. His rationale for removing the top layers at Great Zimbabwe was motivated by the belief that they constituted a local African occupation associated with Bantu degeneracy (Hall 1905). By any standards, Hall’s work was unacceptable and illogical as it was also characterised by ruthless plundering. More reputable work began with that of David Randall-MacIver in 1905. He recovered a quantity of material in datable contexts, identifying in the process datable oriental imports, from which he concluded that Great Zimbabwe was mediaeval in date and of an indigenous workmanship (Randall-MacIver 1906). He excavated in both the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure, and speculated that the various ruins at Great Zimbabwe could be of different dates. He opened seven test trenches in the Hill Complex’s Western Enclosure which yielded finds that further confirmed the indigenous workmanship of the sites.

Following Randall-MacIver’s efforts, professional research at Great Zimbabwe only appeared 25 years later, with the work of Gertrude Caton-Thompson. By the time of her excavations in 1929, much of the Hill Complex and the Great Enclosure had been ravaged by earlier treasure seekers, looters and antiquarians. She focused her attention on the Maund Ruins in the valley, on the ridge above the Renders Ruin, and she also opened a tunnel underneath the conical tower in the Great Enclosure. Her work resulted in the general chronological frame that continues to define the origins and development of Great Zimbabwe. Using beads and Chinese porcelain, Caton-Thompson (1931) suggested that the earlier foundations are dated to the 8th and 9th century, while the walling and the main occupation was a 13th-century development. She described Great Zimbabwe as of “Bantu origin and of a mediaeval date [...]” and suggested its mystery lay in the “[...] pulsating heart of native Africa” (Caton-Thompson 1931: 199). Critics of Caton-Thompson’s work were quick to dismiss the chronology and the interpretation as speculation owing to the lack of secure dates (Chirikure, Pollard *et al.* 2013).

Attempts to establish secure stratigraphic relationships, ceramic typologies and architectural styles are associated with the work of the Historical Monuments Commission of the then Southern Rhodesia which, in 1958, sent Roger Summers, Keith Robinson and Anthony Whitty to conduct further work at Great Zimbabwe. Excavations were conducted in the Western Enclosure which exposed a series of house floors; while the excavations in the Great Enclosure revealed a series of distinctly coloured and textured clays, allowing for the different stages of construction to be identified (Robinson *et al.* 1961). Their work resulted in a five-phase occupation of the site that suggested the site had been occupied by Shona people from the 11th century until the 19th century (Summers *et al.* 1961; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008; Chirikure *et al.* 2012).

Since the work of the Historical Monuments Commission in the 1960s and until recently, archaeological research at Great Zimbabwe has been isolated and fragmented (Collett *et al.* 1992; Chipunza 1994). The post-independence era has focused

more on the conservation of the stone walling and *dhaka* structures (see Ndoro 2005; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008). While a great deal of literature was generated on Great Zimbabwe, the papers were mostly reviews, reanalyses and reinterpretations of museum collections, dates, generally from the rich Great Zimbabwe archive (see Huffman & Vogel 1991; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008; Huffman 2011; Chirikure, Pollard *et al.* 2013; Chirikure, Manyanga *et al.* 2013; Chirikure, Moultrie *et al.* 2017). Recently, there has been a growing renewed interest in archaeological research at Great Zimbabwe (Pikirayi *et al.* 2016; Chirikure, Bandama *et al.* 2017; Chirikure, Moultrie *et al.* 2017).

Just as at Mapungubwe, local communities had a permanent presence at the excavations, but only as labourers (Fig. 2). The initial efforts at studying Great Zimbabwe were resisted by the local communities who were more than uncomfortable with the theft of material from the site (see Bent 1896; Burke 1969). It took Carl Mauch a week just to access the site, and then the Nemamwa *svikiro* (senior spirit medium at Great Zimbabwe) refused to entertain Mauch’s request for information (Matenga 2012: 66). A systematic process of alienation of the local communities was then implemented by the colonial government, which saw the traditional custodians and lineages that lived around Great Zimbabwe being moved away (Pwiti & Ndoro 1999; Ndoro 2005). After that, ‘archaeological’ science could be exercised without the nagging presence of recalcitrant local communities. The general approach by the colonial archaeologists was that the local communities were not useful in any interpretations, as Great Zimbabwe was erroneously seen as a long-lost Phoenician civilisation. The work of antiquarians and settler colonial ideology never commanded a following among the local communities, who instead kept their own narratives about Great Zimbabwe and related sites. They continued to view Great Zimbabwe as their shrine, and not as a monument (see Ndoro 2005). The local lineages continued to identify with important landmarks in the cultural landscape such as their old burial grounds, farming and hunting areas, and many other places that directly linked with the past and had associations with Great Zimbabwe (see Fontein 2006, 2015; Sinamai 2017). Old, unresolved issues of alienation and access to the site continue to dominate the interaction between the legal custodian (National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe) and the traditional custodians (local communities). The current policy of co-opting local communities is tolerated but is not really accepted. Traditional leaders are very emphatic in their declaration that they are not stakeholders but owners of the site (Chief Fortune Charumbira, quoted in Macheke 2016). The local communities’ involvement in the archaeological science has been peripheral, with their being ‘content’ (for now) with dealing with issues of tradition (see Sinamai 2017) and the re-enactment of a 19th century Shona way of life at the Shona Village. Historians have been hesitant to engage with Great Zimbabwe, its history, and local communities, on a technicality. The mediaeval date for Great Zimbabwe is considered too old for oral traditions to be reliable, and known Portuguese documents are not specific to the site. More recently, however, we are beginning to see increased efforts by anthropologists and heritage managers in making connections between Great Zimbabwe, its surroundings, and the local communities (see Fontein 2006; 2015; Macheke 2016; Sinamai 2017).

## DISCUSSION: MAPUNGUBWE-GREAT ZIMBABWE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL COMPARISONS

The historiography of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe shares many things in common. The sites are the most recognisable Iron Age sites in southern Africa. However, Great



**FIG. 4.** Vandalised deposits in the Western Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe showing in excess of 2 m of cultural deposit that was cleared; in contrast, Mapungubwe was seen as providing a more secure deposit. (Photograph: Posselt 1908; courtesy of NMMZ, Great Zimbabwe Conservation Centre Archive.)

Zimbabwe stands out because of the majestic stone walling, not paralleled anywhere else, and making it one of the most impressive archaeological remains in the world. Mapungubwe, on the other hand, while lacking the impressive walling tradition, still occupies a critical place in the development of socio-political complexity, and has been popularised as the place where the Zimbabwe culture originated (see Huffman 2000). This defines the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe debate which, in the past 80 years, has seen opinions shift variously between Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe as the centre of the origins of the Zimbabwe culture.

Since its popularisation in the Western world by Mauch in the late 19th century, Great Zimbabwe was the first to attract early research, beginning with the work of Bent (1896), Hall and Neal (1902), Randall-MacIver (1906), Caton-Thompson (1931). Formal archaeological work at Mapungubwe began between 1933 and 1940 (Fouché 1937; Gardner 1963). The lure of Great Zimbabwe and the research that had been completed in the then Southern Rhodesia strongly influenced the early work at Mapungubwe. We see repeatedly the excavations at Mapungubwe making reference to the materials recovered at Great Zimbabwe, and related sites (see Fouché 1937; Gardner 1963). Extensive Iron Age research in Southern Rhodesia provided a platform for comparative research and a useful reference point for South African scholars. The result is that studies of Zimbabwe exerted undue influence on the archaeology of its southern neighbour. Often, early scholars working on the southern African Iron Age did not see a distinction between the archaeology of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa.

Between 1933 and 1935, the Mapungubwe expedition team led by Leo Fouché depended on comparative material from Southern Rhodesia in their study of the Mapungubwe material. This comparative material was provided by Dr and

Mrs L.C. Thompson of the National Museum of Southern Rhodesia. Fieldwork from 1933 to 1935 was directed by Rev. Neville Jones of Southern Rhodesia. Mr R. Pearson who had worked with the gold objects at Zimbabwe, was tasked with studying the gold objects at Mapungubwe. One also sees a persistent reference to work in Zimbabwe, especially that of Caton-Thompson (1931) and Schofield (1937). Caton-Thompson provided the much-needed brainstorming on the Mapungubwe finds, and was in regular correspondence with Fouché throughout the expedition. It appears that the researchers at Mapungubwe were well acquainted with the Zimbabwe finds, and always saw resemblances between the materials at Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe (Fouché 1937: 2). The similarities in the material culture of the two sites excited the researchers who were convinced that the undisturbed context at Mapungubwe would help solve the riddle of Great Zimbabwe which, by that stage, had already been ransacked by treasure hunters (Fig. 4). In spite of this, the Southern Rhodesian presence at Mapungubwe during Fouché's expedition was significant if not overbearing.

Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are regarded as Shona civilisations. It was Schofield (1937) who first equated the pottery from Mapungubwe with that of the Shona. The lack of absolute methods of dating the materials created havoc among the early research, and determining the sequence of the two sites on the basis of ceramics, imports and gold objects, was indeed problematic. Fouché (1937) thus concluded that:

[...] the question naturally arises as to which of the two sites, Zimbabwe or Mapungubwe, was occupied first by these makers of fine pottery. From the presence of the gold objects, which are a strong link with Rhodesia and from which they certainly came, there can be no doubt that the Shona people came across the Limpopo subsequent to their having estab-

lished themselves at Zimbabwe, and possibly at the end of their occupation (Fouché 1937: 27).

Regular correspondence between Fouché, Caton-Thompson, and Schofield emphasised the close similarity of the ceramics at Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe. The involvement of Rhodesian archaeologists in the work at Mapungubwe in the 1930s resulted in strong parallels being established between the Zimbabwe sites and those in South Africa. Researchers were obviously then quick to note that comparative material had been identified at Great Zimbabwe and related sites. Schofield (1937) is even more assertive in making this connection:

From this we can say without hesitation that the class M1 ware at Mapungubwe is indistinguishable from class B ware at Zimbabwe [...] (Schofield 1937: 42)

Dissenting voices were already present during the early years of research. In the 1930s, scholars like Van Riet Lowe (1936), Beck (1937) and Caton-Thompson (1939), were noting some differences in the material culture of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe (see Chirikure, Pollard *et al.* 2013). Later, Robinson's (1959, 1965) work in western Zimbabwe emphasised the connection between Leopard's Kopje and Khami period sites (Robinson 1965). A reanalysis of the material culture by Chirikure, Pollard *et al.* (2013) reveals that Khami ceramics and beads have closer affinities with those from Woolandale and Mapungubwe, especially some beakers from Khami which show a strong resemblance to those from Mapungubwe and other Leopard's Kopje sites.

A major research question in the 1970s was to establish the sequence of the various farming community settlements that had been recorded and excavated in southern Africa. The distinction between the Leopard's Kopje and the Zimbabwe culture (see Garlake 1970, 1976; Huffman 1972) preoccupied many of the debates. Garlake (1976: 223) regarded the two traditions as having grown and declined together, while Huffman (1972: 356) considered Woolandale, Mapungubwe, and Zimbabwe Phase III/IV as contemporaries. However, there was an acknowledgement that Leopard's Kopje and Zimbabwe had indistinguishable ceramics, and that the two traditions may have shared more than a common origin (Huffman 1974; Garlake 1976). The position was that Great Zimbabwe was seen as the earliest site and the origin of the Zimbabwe culture (see Huffman 1972: 355). Garlake (1976) is more assertive on the connection between Leopard's Kopje and Khami. He ascribed the terrace building typical of Khami and Rozvi capitals as deriving from the earlier Leopard's Kopje retaining walls (Garlake 1976: 226). Similar ideas have been echoed in Botswana, associated with the work of Van Waarden (2011, 2012). The focus thus continued to shift from Mapungubwe to Great Zimbabwe, and then to Khami in western Zimbabwe. Southern Africa's early civilisations of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe were seen as a result of migratory movements (Garlake 1982: 2). Invariably, studies have been obsessed with origins (see Huffman 1972, 1974, 2000, 2011, 2015a, b; Chirikure *et al.* 2014; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2015). Often, attributing origins to southern Africa's early states has been based on inadequate archaeological evidence and in some instances, advanced by political motives.

The idea that Mapungubwe is a Shona civilisation was propagated out of these observations on ceramics and other material affinities with Great Zimbabwe. For a long time Mapungubwe was seen as an outpost of a Shona culture with a demonstrated contact with Great Zimbabwe, especially during the latter's nascent phase. In the absence of secure dating,

the connection between Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe remained speculative. The radiocarbon revolution brought clarity to the debate, and both Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe have since been securely dated (see Huffman & Vogel 1991; Meyer 2000; Chirikure *et al.* 2012). Building on the work of Summers *et al.* (1961), Great Zimbabwe's chronology has been placed into a five-phase occupational sequence beginning with Period I (AD 100–300), followed by Period II (AD 300–1085), Period III (AD 1085–1450), Period IV (AD 1450–1833), and finally, Period V (AD 1833–1900) (see Robinson 1961; Summers *et al.* 1961; Chirikure, Manyanga *et al.* 2013). Summers *et al.* (1961) suggest that Great Zimbabwe was continuously occupied and used by Shona people from the 11th to the late 19th centuries AD, and the recent occupation of Great Zimbabwe by Shona people is well supported in the archival record (see Fig. 5)

A number of radiocarbon dates obtained in the early 1980s (see Hall & Vogel 1980; Eloff & Meyer 1981; Huffman 1982) demonstrated that the main occupation at Mapungubwe Hill pre-dates that of the main building in stone at Great Zimbabwe. An upsurge of research on the Iron Age of southern Africa, together with improved methods of dating, changed the narratives on the origins of the Zimbabwe culture. By 1982, Mapungubwe was confirmed as a major centre demonstrating evidence of a hierarchical society, with specialists and communities that engaged in extensive trade with the east coast of Africa (Sinclair 1987; Huffman 1996). Mapungubwe was now affirmed as the origin of the Zimbabwe culture (see Huffman 1982). Further refinement of the dating at Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe (see Huffman & Vogel 1991; Vogel 2000) also swung the pendulum in favour of Mapungubwe as the origin of the Zimbabwe culture. Mapungubwe is thought to have been abandoned in AD 1290 owing to climate change, when the Mapungubwe elites are thought to have migrated to Great Zimbabwe where they enforced the spatial template on the nascent state of Great Zimbabwe (see Huffman 2000, 2009).

The response north of the Limpopo was swift, with the suggestion that the impact of climate change, if any, did not affect the entire Limpopo valley (see Manyanga *et al.* 2000; Manyanga 2001, 2007, 2018) as some areas in the Limpopo valley provided opportunities to cope with the deteriorating environmental conditions. Further archaeological work reinforces the idea that the post-AD 1290 period in the Shashe-Limpopo basin saw successful agro-pastoral societies. The 2000s also saw researchers of the Shashe-Limpopo basin engaged with the climatic reconstructions and coping mechanisms (Holmgren *et al.* 2003; Ekblom 2004; Holmgren & Öberg 2006; Ekblom *et al.* 2012). These studies all emphasise that seasonal and annual variability was a consistent feature in southern Africa's palaeoenvironments (see Manyanga 2018). Smith (2005) makes use of isotopic studies and demonstrates that the climate in the post-AD 1290 period was wetter than now although variable, and was therefore able to support agro-pastoral societies. Schoeman (2006) and Murimbika (2006) highlight rainmaking activities as a strategy to mitigate the effects of recurrent droughts and famine. Huffman (2009) makes use of archaeology and ethnography to pinpoint evidence for drought mitigation during the Iron Age.

The popularisation of Mapungubwe as the origin of the Zimbabwe culture relegated such centres as Mapela (see Garlake 1968) to second-order settlements that were occupied by a few elites (Huffman 1982:145). This is in contrast to previous interpretations that regarded Mapela as a major state centre (Fig. 6), with its massive investment in stone walling yet unsurpassed at many sites in southern Africa (see Garlake 1968;



**FIG. 5.** Chief Mugabe's village on the Acropolis at Great Zimbabwe in 1890, evidence that Great Zimbabwe was occupied by Shona people in the 19th century. (Photograph: courtesy of NMMZ, Great Zimbabwe Conservation Centre Archive.)

Beach 1994; Chirikure *et al.* 2014; Chirikure *et al.* 2016). Huffman (1982) suggests the possibility that at Mapungubwe's peak, Great Zimbabwe was only a second-order settlement to Mapungubwe. Power and economic success only came to Great Zimbabwe with the abandonment of Mapungubwe in AD 1290 (see Huffman 1996, 2000, 2007). The explanation suggests that after the decline of Great Zimbabwe, Khami (in western Zimbabwe) and Mutapa (northern Zimbabwe) became the new centres of power.

A linear model for the origin and development of the Zimbabwe culture has been suggested where the sites of Mapungubwe (1100–1290), Great Zimbabwe (1200–1450), Khami (1450–1800), and Mutapa (1450–1800) are thought to have grown, developed, and declined coevally (see Chirikure, Pollard *et al.* 2013). Recently, this has been questioned, and a model suggesting multiple origins of the Zimbabwe culture and an earlier development date has been put forward (see Chirikure, Pollard *et al.* 2013; Chirikure *et al.* 2016). Evidence from Mapela suggests that it was a major centre, probably four times the size of Mapungubwe Hill (Fig. 7). The site exhibits characteristics of a hierarchical society, with evidence of economic diversification, population agglomeration, and external trade. These developments occurred 200 years earlier than Mapungubwe, prompting Chirikure *et al.* (2014) to consider it a possible origin of the Zimbabwe culture. In response, Huffman (2014) insists on the temporal primacy of Mapungubwe and the Shashe-Limpopo valley in initiating the process to socio-political complexity, and ascribes Mapela to a Woolandale polity.

Early South African scholarship saw the need for collaboration and transnational research in archaeology. Fouché (1937: 176) regarded joint research on the Later Iron Age between the then Southern Rhodesia and South Africa as an absolute necessity, and viewed the modern political boundaries as an impediment to archaeological investigations. Fouché's habit of integrating scholars from Southern Rhodesia into his expedition has already been noted, and his disdain for the political boundaries is captured in the following quotation:

It was very tantalising to stand on the summit of Mapungubwe and look at certain hills in Rhodesia across the nearby border, knowing that these hills, in native eyes, were like Mapungubwe, forbidden places, where the rash intruder would be struck dead by lightning. To be prevented by an imaginary line from examining these places, in order to determine whether the trail picked up at Mapungubwe led through them to the north – that was more than tantalising – it was downright maddening! (Fouché 1937: 178)

Subsequent work at Mapungubwe by Gardner (1963: 67) also advocated harmonious and close archaeological cooperation between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. At some point, the demand to make connections between the sites north and south of the Limpopo was overwhelming for archaeologists, and any account which treated the sites in the different countries as separate were proving difficult to sustain:

Zimbabwe keeps on being called to mind, and I am continually being pestered to explain the relationship of the Rhodesian sites to ours. (Gardner 1963: 84)

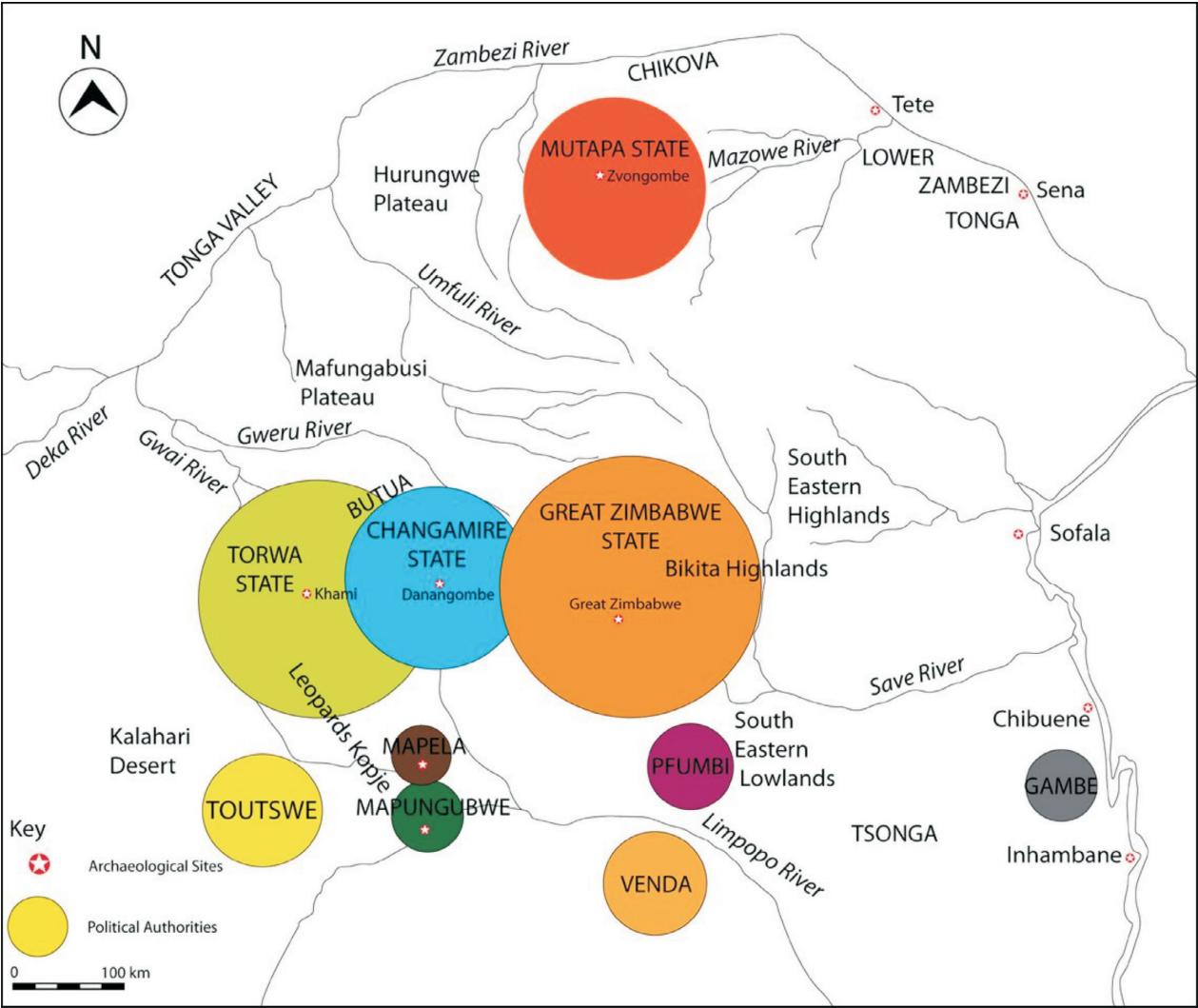


**FIG. 6.** Early political centres in southern Africa during the second millennium AD (adapted from Beach 1984): Mapela was regarded as a major political centre, an idea reinforced by recent archaeological studies.

Over the years, it is clear that archaeologists and related professionals north and south of the Limpopo have tended to ‘look over the border’ in search of comparative material. Field visits and comparing notes has been a common feature since the 2000s. In the recent past, a number of Zimbabwean scholars have moved south of the Limpopo to teach in South African universities. However, they continue to initiate research on the Zimbabwe culture in both South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A comparable interpretive model was extended to present day central and eastern Botswana, where Iron Age archaeological research has been carried out as an extension of work that was initiated in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Research has followed a widely held view that social developments in central and eastern Botswana were inspired or originated from the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area. This development is thought to have been triggered by the arrival of Leopard’s Kopje people in the Shashe-Limpopo basin during the 10th century AD. This resulted in the displacement of hitherto Zhizo elites and most of their people westwards into modern day Botswana (see Huffman 2005, 2007b; Denbow *et al.* 2008; Du Piesanie 2008). Elite or chiefly settlements such as Lose (see Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1990), Toutswemogala (Denbow 1984) and Bosutswe (Denbow *et al.* 2008) are all thought to have a Mapungubwe influence in their later development. It is only recently that scholarship in Botswana started discounting the influence of the people of the Mapungubwe Cultural Land-

scape on socio-political complexity in central and eastern Botswana. Calabrese (2000, 2005, 2007) questions the wholesale displacement of Zhizo people from the Limpopo valley on the basis of the presence of Zhizo-related Leokwe settlements that are contemporary with K2. Towards the Kalahari margins, in the Bosutswe region, Klehm (2013: 4) strongly asserts that complexity “[...] arose from local actors and out of localised contexts”. This is a major paradigm shift that departs from the traditional approach which has always looked at complexity in central Botswana as having direct connections with events in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence area.

In northeastern Botswana, the presence of stone walled settlements like Vhumba, Domboshava, Majande, and Mothudi were for many years seen as an extension of the Zimbabwe culture into Botswana (see Beach 1980; Robinson 1985; Mudenge 1988; Tlou & Campbell 1997; Pikirayi 2001). These studies make reference to the precolonial state of Butua, whose extent straddled the modern boundary of Zimbabwe and Botswana. Once more, these developments were articulated within the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe origins debate. In recent years, Van Waarden (1987, 1989, 2011, 2012) questions the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe connection in understanding the stone walled settlements in northeastern Botswana. Instead, she suggests a local development of Khami with possible roots in Woolandale (Van Waarden 2011, 2012; Chirikure *et al.* 2012). Mothulatshipi and Thabeng’s (2015)

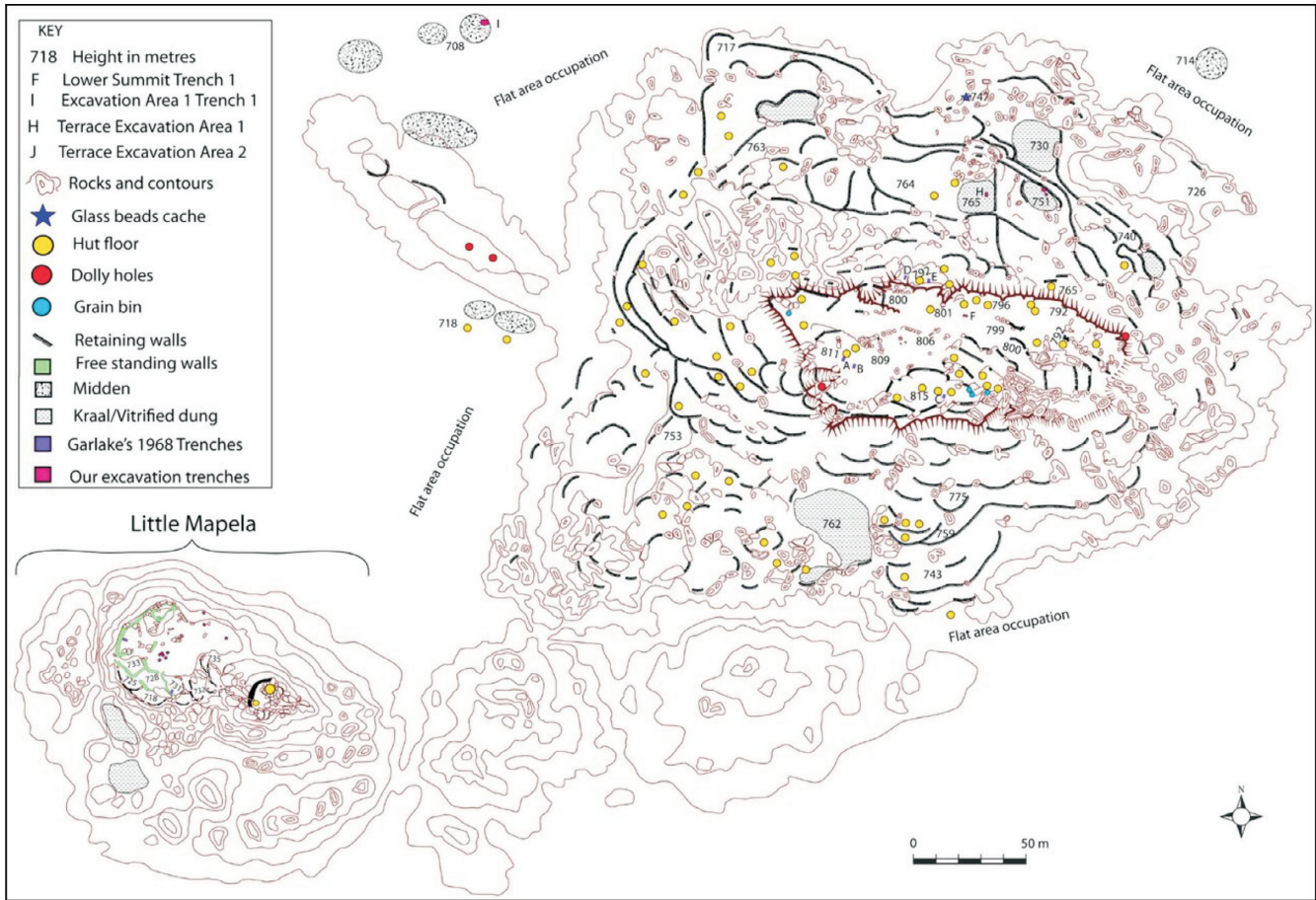


**FIG. 7.** Mapela Main Hill settlement in the Shashe Valley: recently, the site has been the focus of divergence in opinion regarding its position in the origins of the Zimbabwe culture.

research at Leshongwane (Mothudi) suggests a local and early development of stone building traditions in eastern Botswana, and is part of the growing dissatisfaction with the linear model that views the Zimbabwe culture as originating from Mapungubwe. The recent emphasis on local actors and localised contexts in articulating the development of socio-political complexity in central and eastern Botswana is a clear departure from the previous interpretations that have always looked at these developments as an appendage or extension of developments in South Africa or Zimbabwe.

Any history of South African Iron Age archaeology will be incomplete without a reference to its northern neighbours. The polarised opinions, cooperation, and exchange of human resources and expertise have enriched the later prehistory of southern Africa. This has provided the much needed brainstorming and has kept the debate on the development of the Zimbabwe culture going. However, Zimbabwean archaeology is navigating a new direction in interpreting the Zimbabwe culture (see Chirikure, Manyanga *et al.* 2013). The current interpretive frameworks use models rooted in African philosophical traditions and knowledge systems (see Beach 1998; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008; Manyanga *et al.* 2010; Chirikure *et al.* 2012; Pwiti *et al.* 2013). Generally, post-independence Zimbabwean archaeology has embraced the use of non-Western knowledge on how landscapes and their material world are perceived, in navigating the past. These knowledge systems include indigenous perceptions of economy, power and political succession (Pwiti 1991; Beach 1998; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008); archaeological sites and identity, subsistence and livelihoods (Garlake 1982; Thorp 1995; Manyanga 2007); and symbolism and the use of space (Huffman 1984, 1996, 2011; Chirikure & Pikirayi 2008).

Possibly the most encouraging trend from this perspective is that there is an implied acknowledgement in most of the academic debates that Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are Shona civilisations, and that appropriate models should therefore derive from Shona customs and practices. A similar approach can be used to understand precolonial developments in central and eastern Botswana, where scholars are advocating for local influences in the development of complexity.

While archaeologists in recent years have had divided opinions over the origins of the Zimbabwe culture, politicians have seen opportunities to use Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe as rallying points for regional integration among southern African nations. In South Africa, Mapungubwe is an important heritage site and a symbol of a nation which is relevant to various ethnicities in South Africa. The Twamamba, Lea, Ngona, Venda, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Afrikaners and the Khoe-San people see connections with the site and the cultural landscape (see MISTRA 2010). The designation of Mapungubwe as a Shona civilisation connects the site with the linguistic majority of Zimbabwe. Recent African governments, with their thrust for the idea of an African renaissance, regard Mapungubwe as an African civilisation and as a heritage symbol that cements African solidarity and unity. Today, the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape forms part of a transfrontier park, the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area, a zone symbolising freedom of movement across physical boundaries and barrier created by colonialism. These ideas build from an 80-year-old history of research in South Africa and its neighbours, where archaeologists have advocated for multidisciplinary, collaborative and trans-boundary research in southern Africa.

It has been demonstrated by many scholars that the archaeology of southern African nations cuts across the modern political boundaries and that trans-boundary research is an imperative (see Manyanga 2007; Mothulatshipi 2009). Tangentially, it may be worth noting that the theme of the 2014 PAA conference held in South Africa was 'African Archaeology without Frontiers' (Esterhuysen *et al.* 2016). This is so because the modern boundaries separate related communities who share a common past, language, belief systems, norms and values. The Iron Age archaeology of northern South Africa has been connected with developments associated with socio-political complexity in central and eastern Botswana, the Zimbabwean plateau and Mozambique's coastal plains. Since the 1930s, archaeology in South Africa and its neighbours have advocated that any understanding of these developments must be based on observations from the broader region that cuts across political and institutional boundaries. The historiography of the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe debates demonstrates how connected South African archaeology has been with its neighbours.

## CONCLUSION

Since the early part of the 20th century, archaeologists working in the southern regions of Zimbabwe and those in northern South Africa have compared notes, and in certain cases adopted similar perspectives in the interpretation of the precolonial past of the region. Common themes and personalities since the 1930s to the present have created a fused interpretation of the past in southern Africa. The history of research on Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe presents some interesting reading, while some of the debates and perspectives have found their way into the current debates on the origins of the Zimbabwe culture. It is an accepted truth that the existing interpretations of the Zimbabwe culture were built on models that excluded and continue to exclude local communities in knowledge production. There is a need for archaeologists to reflect seriously on the historiography of the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe debate if Iron Age archaeology in southern Africa is to transform. Calls to rethink the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe debate are growing. Telling results have already been achieved and there is growing optimism that the new perspectives in Zimbabwean archaeology will take the Mapungubwe-Great Zimbabwe debate to new heights and fresh understandings.

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