

## **THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF THE SHASHE-LIMPOPO CONFLUENCE ZONE: THREATS AND CHALLENGES OF PRESERVING A WORLD HERITAGE SETTING**

*Pikirayi Innocent / Zimbabwe*

Senior Lecturer in Archaeology Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Pretoria

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### **Introduction**

The content of this essay straddles themes II and III of the 15th General Assembly of the ICOMOS Scientific Symposium, "Monuments and their setting-conserving cultural heritage in changing townscapes and landscapes". However, it focuses more on theme II, which examines the vulnerabilities within the settings of monuments and sites, by presenting threats and challenges of a different kind in the management of cultural landscapes recognized as world heritage places. Although it presents in general the actual or potential impacts of natural hazards and human induced environmental problems, it pays particular attention to the management measures required to address the needs for protection and adequate control of settings of cultural landscapes. Local communities play an important role in identifying and safeguarding heritage resources, and a negation of their concerns and expectations is a violation of fundamental principles in heritage management.

The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape (MCL) located in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence zone separating the modern borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana was placed on the World Heritage List in 2003. UNESCO inscribed the site on the list on the basis of criterion (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v). Its landscape contains evidence for an important interchange of human values that resulted in significant cultural and social changes in the southern African region between AD 900 and 1300. The landscape has archaeological evidence attesting to the existence of a state society, which at the time was the largest in the region. This state had trading connections with eastern Africa and Asia, attesting to the exchange of human values. Scientists have also documented evidence of climate change in the area, which archaeologists have used to model the growth and demise of the kingdom based at Mapungubwe hill. The kingdom thus attests to a culture that became vulnerable to irreversible change.

The cultural landscape dates from the late Pleistocene times, but its importance to modern South Africa was brought about by the development of a kingdom that was

based on Mapungubwe and nearby hills during the early second millennium AD. Mapungubwe presided over a hierarchy of urban centres whose wealth derived from gold mining and the exploitation of wild animals, particularly elephants. Gold, ivory and animal skins were traded with the Swahili on the East African coast. Conservation of such a cultural landscape reflecting an interchange of human values in the past goes beyond the site of Mapungubwe. In this essay, I assess the major conservation challenges affecting this landscape beyond those identified in the management plan. Of particular importance are community concerns regarding ownership of cultural property now identified as 'national' and part of 'global' heritage. A second issue revolves around research, especially the role played by South African academic institutions such as the University of Pretoria, and the historical role they have played with regards to Mapungubwe. This role needs to be reviewed in the context of global trends in world heritage management. Problems will always arise when attempts are made to address both issues, but heritage managers, stake holders and state parties are advised to act in the best interests of heritage conservation. By conservation I mean preservation as presented and discussed in the ICOMOS (2004) International Charters for Conservation and Restoration (2nd edition).

This essay is organized into three sections. The first section presents the MCL, showing how it evolved since prehistoric times. The second section examines the management of archaeological resources from the landscape, presenting Mapungubwe as a relict archaeological landscape, demonstrating that there are many interlocking factors that interfere with the research process. The third section deals with community concerns in the management of the landscape, and by presenting the current debate on repatriation and restitution of cultural remains from Mapungubwe and Bambandyanalo (K2), show how the communities would like to be involved in the management of the heritage. It is evident that developments in South African heritage legislation since the late 1990s have raised awareness among communities, and triggered a process

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critical to the management of heritage places, and at the same time posing specific challenges to MCL.

### **The Evolution of MCL**

The earliest prehistoric settlements in the middle Limpopo valley date from the terminal Pleistocene. Hunter-gatherers sites, over 20 of which have been located, point towards settlement activity if environmental conditions were favourable. Rock art sites found in the area, some of which is also linked to early herder communities, are pointers towards human interaction with the landscape, inter-group relations and ritual activity. The process of Iron Age settlement in the region, which is also linked with early farming societies, is poorly understood. It would appear it was initially relatively minimal. Settlements dating from the first half of the first millennium AD are linked to the pottery makers akin to those living at the site of Happy Rest. These were subsistence farmers who kept cattle, hunted wild animals, and grew some crops, climatic conditions permitting. Later farmers, who lived at Schroda and contemporary sites from the 7th or 8th century AD (Hanisch 1981), apparently relied less on crop cultivation due to the increasingly arid environment of the basin. They seem to have exploited wild animals such as elephants, antelope and leopards, whose products, particularly ivory and animal skins, were traded with eastern Africa in exchange for glass beads and other valuable imports (Voigt 1983). Zhizo type settlements, around 30 of which have been recorded, probably constituted the first chiefdom in the area. Competition for resources must have been so intense that other groups were attracted to the basin, resulting in the emergence of such centers as K2 (1000-1220 AD). The K2 people took advantage of the improved climatic conditions to cultivate millet, sorghum, other grains, and beans in the Limpopo floodplain. They however continued to rear cattle in the adjacent Mopane woodlands in the plateau higher up the floodplain, and hunted wild animals. They interacted with other communities, as seen from settlements such as Leokwe Hill, and a few other sites. They conducted trade with eastern Africa and Asia, as attested by over 6500 glass beads recovered from the site. Figurines point towards ritual activity, while iron and copper working indicate thriving metallurgy.

From 1220 AD, there is a settlement shift towards Mapungubwe Hill. According to the archaeological evidence, settlement organization and around Mapungubwe Hill adopts a social organizational pattern that would later be replicated at Great Zimbabwe (1270-1550 AD) and other sites of the Zimbabwe Culture. Farming was an important

activity, as well as alluvial gold mining and elephant hunting for ivory. These products were traded with the Indian Ocean commercial world for glass beads, and, Near-Eastern and Far-Eastern ceramics. With an estimated population of 3000-5000, Mapungubwe presided over a hierarchy of settlements in a region about 30000 square kilometers, and archaeologists believe that this was one of the earliest state societies in southern Africa (Huffman 1986, 1996). Mapungubwe came to an end as a state between 1270 and 1300 due to the unfavourable climatic conditions in the middle Limpopo valley (Huffman 2000, 2005). This forced people to disperse to other areas in the basin and beyond. One possible area is the Mateke Hills, further down the Limpopo basin, in what is now south-eastern Zimbabwe (Manyanga et. al. 2000). The other is Lose Hill, in eastern Botswana. Both areas display continuity of the culture of K2 and Mapungubwe. Eventually, Great Zimbabwe rose to prominence, and this process is linked to the demise of Mapungubwe as a centre of political power, although this may not have involved the same people (Huffman 2005).

Archaeological settlements in the MCL dating from the 14th century onwards are attributed to the Sotho-Tswana (Icon type sites), and Kalanga (Khami phase sites). Some of these groups, including the Venda, continued to live in the area until recent times when they were moved by European farmers who opened up the landscape for commercial farming, wildlife management and settlement.

### **Managing a Relict Archaeological Landscape**

For management purposes, the MCL corresponds with the Vhembe-Dongola National Park. The core area is about 30000 hectares, buffered by a zone about 10000 hectares. It is dominated by reddish sandstone hills. The Limpopo River is currently the northern boundary, but this will soon change when the proposed Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park/Conservation Area straddling South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe becomes operational. It is hoped that this approximately 5000 square kilometer park will effectively buffer the cultural landscapes, but as will be discussed below, there are some challenges. Land usage within the confines of the park is mainly commercial farming, although some farms have been used for wild animal ranching, and some are being managed by De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd to extract, store and pump water to the newly opened diamond mine at Venetia located just outside the park. The plan is to eventually stop agriculture, and allow the landscape to return to its natural status. Since 1999, management of the park has been transferred to South African National Parks (SANParks).

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In managing a cultural landscape such as Mapungubwe, there are principles heritage practitioners have to adhere to. As stated above, the cultural values presented by the MCL are of prehistoric origins and need to be sustained for present and future generations. That the landscape is on the world heritage list means these values are acknowledged worldwide. Treating Mapungubwe as part of a cultural landscape is accepting historical layering, long and short-term transformations in human cultural development, as well as the context in which heritage resources are embedded.

A number of challenges particular to the confluence zone pose threats to the archaeological heritage. It is difficult to categorize the threats under any broad themes, as these are very much inter-connected. They are also neither purely natural or anthropogenic, but this should be expected in cultural landscapes. Mapungubwe presents itself as a relict cultural landscape (see Startin 1995) and its study primarily examines the patterning in the archaeological data that is critical for the definition of such as landscape (see Huffman 1986, 2005). In order to manage the archaeological resources associated with this landscape, we must understand it through identification, recording, classification, analyses and synthesis (Startin 1995). Archaeological research is an important management of component of the cultural landscape. A well-formulated research policy is desirable for sites such as Mapungubwe and K2, and this should take into account the problems and constraints of previous research (see Eloff 1979, Fouche 1937, Gardner 1955, 1956, Meyer 1998).

The confluence zone is prone to serious flooding as recent El-Nino related events have demonstrated. Flooding transforms the landscape, destroying the archaeological heritage in the process. Archaeologists must work closely with climatologists to determine both short and long-term cycles of climate change/fluctuations, and how these influenced settlement patterning in the area. It is also important to provide accurate climate forecast data for use by heritage managers and conservators. Research data on past flooding events should be assessed in terms of how the archaeological evidence, particularly the flora and fauna, is preserved or destroyed, and what impact this could have on sites located in the floodplain. Urban settlements such as K2 and Mapungubwe are prone to soil creep, gully erosion, and vegetation overgrowth, mostly arising from these catastrophes. Stabilization measures at K2 and Mapungubwe are an on-going conservation measure, but there are addressing previous excavation efforts that have compromised the authenticity of these sites.

Commercial farming has already destroyed a large number of surface artifact concentrations and scatters, since the early 19th century. However, with management authority changing hands, this situation will be reversed. The impact of livestock on the landscape appears moderate, although there are indications that this was substantial in the past. There are other pressures on the physical environment of the landscape, which also impact on the archaeological heritage. Elephants, whose numbers are set to increase, may pose a danger to sites such as K2, but they need to be managed as part of the landscape whose communities thrived on ivory trade during the past.

Excavations destroy the archaeological heritage no matter how minimal these are in terms of scale. The main challenge is how researchers should strike a balance between purely archaeological surveys with excavations. I would strongly recommend excavations associated with site stabilization and conservation. Researchers can still pose problem-oriented questions within this framework. Research-oriented excavations should demonstrate why the less (or non) destructive remote sensing techniques are not preferred.

Mining and quarrying operations are excavations of more serious nature, and these are very much destructive to the archaeological heritage. A number of mining operations are located in the landscape's buffer zone. Diamond mining seems to pose limited impact, and its activities have largely complied with the requirements of South African legislation pertaining to environmental conservation. Coal deposits have been discovered in the area, and if mining operations are allowed to go ahead, will negatively impact on the landscape through coal dust pollution. It is imperative that such mining operations comply with the relevant legislation, particularly the Environment Conservation Act (ECA) (Act No. 73 of 1989), the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) (Act No. 107 of 1998) and the National Heritage Resources Act (Act No. 25 of 1999). Compliance with the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), and, the World Heritage Conservation Act (1999) is imperative, otherwise the landscape will be exposed to extreme danger, with the consequences that it might be de-listed.

Cultural tourism is another major challenge for the MCL. The landscape is national park, not because of its diversity, but its cultural heritage. The transfrontier park will also see an increase in the number of visitors to the landscape. There numbers have to be monitored, and assessed in terms of their impact on archaeological deposits, rock art, and theft of artifacts. This applies particularly to the site of Mapungubwe,

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where regulation is needed to control visitor flow and access so as not to harm the fragile archaeological deposits. Limiting access to the summit of the hill is strongly recommended.

### **Community Expectations**

To acknowledge that local communities play an important role in identifying and safeguarding heritage resources is a fundamental principle in heritage management. These communities participate in the identification of heritage values and the heritage management process. Their involvement in the management of MCL is a topical issue, which, however, is not given prominence in the management plan. One view is that they have to be educated and trained so as to participate and contribute to heritage management decisions. An alternative view sees them as practitioners of heritage management in their own right, particularly from a traditional viewpoint (see for example Ngoro 2001). They have a better knowledge of the landscape, its values, and how it has contributed to their livelihood. One of the major issues in heritage management today is acknowledgment and respect for intangible elements. One of the major flaws in the nomination dossier for MCL is absence of community participation in the conservation of the area. The 2002 ICOMOS evaluation referred to the conservation of the excavated sites, particularly the artifacts from these, housed mainly at the universities of Venda, Pretoria and Witwatersrand that have conducted considerable research within the landscape. There are other conservation problems, such as site deterioration and the documentation of artifacts recovered from earlier excavations. All these however, relate to the context in which Mapungubwe became alienated from indigenous, black South African communities.

European treasure hunters only knew Mapungubwe when its intangible aspects were violated. Generally African traditional elders safeguard sites from destruction and alienation by resorting to enshrined, safely-guarded intangible values. The story of the alienation of Mapungubwe is connected with the local informant Mowena, who in 1932 led a certain E. S. J. van Graan and his party to Greefswald farm where the site was subsequently located. Once this 'traditional' secret was broken, the integrity of the site was compromised. Looting of precious objects, including gold started, as the area became attractive to prospectors, miners and treasure hunters. Media publicity, followed by intervention by the University of Pretoria, and the eventual acquisition of the farm by the government of South Africa ushered in a phase of systematic pillage in the form of early 'scientific' archaeological excavations (Fouche

1937). The history of archaeological research at Mapungubwe and nearby K2 has been documented by Meyer (1998), but given the importance of intangible cultural heritage which the local communities value in the preservation of these monuments, the apartheid ideology in which the research was conducted, this is certainly not the full story of what happened. Losses of archaeological data due to the approaches of early investigators are comparable to the pillage of Great Zimbabwe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The issue of repatriation and restitution of Mapungubwe and K2 cultural objects and human skeletal remains came to prominence in 2004. The South African National Heritage Resources Act of 1999, which came into effect in April 2000, introduced an integrated and interactive system for the management of South African heritage resources, and empowered local communities in the management and conservation of their heritage in line with set national and international guidelines. Section 41 of the Act provides for the restitution of movable heritage objects, and mandates publicly funded institutions curating these objects to enter into negotiations with bodies or communities with bona fide interest in this regard. Since the middle of 2004, some Venda, Tsonga and Tswana and Shona communities have asked for a return of the artifacts, and a reburial of the human remains. They consider these human remains as "the[ir] ancestors" (own emphasis). In what is set to be a precedent in heritage management, these communities, have mandated their traditional leaders to partner with UP, SANParks in exploring ways of managing the process. The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), established in terms of section 11 of the Act, is tasked towards advancing the interests of the nation in as far as heritage issues are concerned. It is also the final arbiter in issues pertaining to cultural heritage. The listing of the sites of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape on the World Heritage List has enhanced the status of these sites and valued the pre-colonial heritage of South Africa.

This legislative and administrative development obliged some South African research institutions directly involved with Mapungubwe to respond proactively on the issue of cultural objects and human skeletal remains taken from the sites. Thousands of artifacts, including pottery and glass beads, were collected from Mapungubwe and surrounding sites by researchers from the University of Pretoria since the early 1930s (Fouche 1937, Gardner 1955, 1956, 1963, Eloff 1979, Meyer 1998). The Mapungubwe Museum established in 2000 houses some of the most precious objects from the site, including the famous gold rhinoceros. The university's Department of Anatomy for example, houses human skeletal

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remains from Mapungubwe (12 individuals, 3 of which were associated with gold artifacts) and K2 (81 individuals) (for full details see Steyn 1995, 1997, 1998). Considerable research has been carried out on these remains (see for example, Henneberg and Steyn 1994, 1995; Steyn 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, Steyn and Henneberg 1995a, b; 1996, 1997), and there is potential for more research. However it is on this basis that many argue that the university has held onto the remains for sufficiently long enough (over 20 years) to seriously consider ethical issues around restitution and reburial. Understanding community sensitivities emanating from the manner in which past researchers treated these remains is important (see for example Lestrade 1937, de Villiers 1968, 1998, Rightmire 1970). This dimension is largely missing in South Africa, and there is so much to learn from other countries in this regard (see issues on ethics in Green 1991). Research institutions must be proactive in matters of restitution as part of their outreach programme. The communities who have made a claim subsequent to this, apparently deserve serious attention on historical and archaeological grounds (see Huffman 1986, 1996, 2000, Huffman and Hanisch 1987).

By virtue of MCL being part of the South African national estate, there has been dialogue between the university and other stakeholders on the issue of control, ownership, management, repatriation and restitutions of the cultural and skeletal remains. The major bone contention lie in the demand by SAHRA to manage the process of transfer of the artifacts and the skeletal remains back to Mapungubwe, and on behalf of the communities most closely associated with this landscape, a process that the university can equally do. The university has agreed in principle that it was not against the process, but considerable groundwork is required if this dialogue is not allowed to drag for much longer. The answer in my opinion lies in the completion of the curation exercise of the artifacts housed at the university following proper management policies, and this could be followed by the building of a museum and research centre at Mapungubwe and K2 where the objects will be housed, and where research institutions and the various communities linked to Mapungubwe will have access to (see for example Childs 2003, Sullivan 2003, Sullivan and Childs 2003).

These negotiations should be considered as part of the process critical to the overall management of the MCL. It is hoped to result in mutually agreed acts of repatriation and restitution, and how the process should be managed (see for example McManamon 1992). As yet no claim has ever been made under any legislative section of the National Heritage Resources Act, and this should set a precedent and lay the foundations for best practice. This should give the parties

concerned an opportunity to explore the loopholes and inconsistencies in the legislation, particularly on the restitution and repatriation guidelines which are scant, and apparently developed without full consultation across the broad spectrum of South African communities. At this stage, it critical not to conclude that restitution (or even repatriation) would harm scientific research, or compromise "standards" pertaining to the process. Here, ethical considerations outweigh scientific research priorities (refer to arguments in Chase et al 1998, Fluehr-Lobban 1991, Goldstein and Kintigh 1990, Messenger 1991, Vitelli 1981). The reburial of human remains excavated at Thulamela in the neighbouring Kruger National Park is generally regarded as a rushed exercise that compromised potential scientific research. While this may be correct to some degree, it is important to remember that the political contexts in which the remains were exhumed there, and, at Mapungubwe and K2 were different. These contexts had a bearing on community sensitivities in the manner in which ancestral remains are taken away from them, and whether they have any legal power to reclaim them (Swidler 1997, Thomas 2000, Tsosie 1998). The other reason more academic is that research questions directed in the respective projects certainly differed.

The 2002 ICOMOS evaluation mission for the nomination of Mapungubwe recommended the construction of an interpretive centre within the MCL. While such as centre is valuable in informing visitors by presenting and interpreting Mapungubwe, the mission fell short of recommending that some of the artifacts and human skeletal remains housed in various research institutions should be returned to the 'site' through this proposed facility.

### **Conclusion**

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In managing MCL, there is the tendency to focus efforts on Mapungubwe and nearby K2 as heritage managers attempt to grapple with how these sites articulated with the rest of the cultural landscape. Archaeological research, particularly field surveys to document sites and their cultural affinities, remain critical. However, the need to control the level of exhumation of material from the sub-surface is critical. The main reason for this suggestion is that there is considerable cultural material in South African universities and museums that await proper curation and further research before more could be brought carted in (see for example Cantwell et. al 1981). It is also important to re-asses current research goals and objectives, and how these impinge on local community sensitivities, and how community interests

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are compromised by lack of involvement in managing heritage places such as MCL.

In general managing MCL is also about managing change connected with cultural heritage in southern Africa, particularly the new South Africa. With new research data emanating from adjacent Zimbabwe and Botswana, MCL will present itself as a region requiring trans-national management. This challenge is not unusual in world heritage contexts, as examples from elsewhere show that these have been successfully managed as integrated units.

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### Abstract

The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, located in the middle Limpopo basin of northern South Africa (and extending into adjacent Botswana and Zimbabwe), has, since 2003, been placed on the prestigious World Heritage List. A management plan is in place, largely guided by South African heritage legislation and the various international charters for conservation and restoration of such world heritage settings. This presentation critically examines the heritage challenges and threats to Mapungubwe in the light of its newly acquired role in South African history. I argue that sound heritage management should take into account community concerns, as well as stakeholder involvement. The presentation shifts the management aspect towards some research institutions in South Africa, and discusses issues of restitution and repatriation of cultural objects taken from the landscape. In this context, the management of the cultural landscape is also about managing the process of change to take into account indigenous values. Evaluation missions conducted in preparation for the nomination of the landscape for world heritage listing overlooked this aspect, but can be fully integrated into the management plan.

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