Proposal for Research on the Middle Iron Age in the Tshirundu Hills
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University of Pretoria Fieldschool Project

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle Iron Age (MIA) in the Limpopo basin (roughly dated between 900-1400 AD) is a period characterised by the increased consolidation of political power under a ruling elite. This process is realised fully for the first time during the 13th century AD under the Mapungubwe-polity, located in northern South Africa (Huffman 2007). However, there is still little understanding of how Mapungubwe interacted with its larger hinterland. The research proposed in this application seeks to better understand this process by concentrating on the MIA in the Tshirundu Hills, east of Mussina and located in the Maremani Nature Reserve.

2. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

The archaeological site of Mapungubwe (1000 – 1300 AD) is of particular archaeological significance since it is the first example of a southern African community divided into a strict social hierarchy (Huffman 2007). At its fluorescence, Mapungubwe was the centre of a diverse network of trade and commerce that connected the African interior with markets as far away as Europe, the Middle East and China (Meyer 2000). Our understanding of the political landscape during this period however, is hampered by an overemphasis on control and homogeneity from the perspective of the more complex political centres. As a result, communities that occupied the hinterland of the Mapungubwe polity were cast as passive participants in the region's metanarrative. However, comparative anthropological research increasingly shows that this position does not always hold true and dominance and hegemony should be proven rather than assumed.

Archaeologists now approach peripheries as settings where ethnicity, class and power were contrasted in very visible and direct ways (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997; Lightfoot and Martinez, 1995; Rice, 1998). The relationship between centre and hinterland was often a complex dynamic between forces of integration, mutual dependence, conflict and contestation (MacEachern, 1993; McIntosh, 2005; McIntosh and McIntosh, 2003). This research highlights that centres of power never

exist in isolation; they are always articulated with a regional hinterland in a way that represents a novel kind of interdependent relationship. This basic recognition will bring to the fore the important role of local interactions in structuring MIA.

As such, I propose to explore communities in the Mapungubwe hinterland, in particular in the Tshirundu Hills, east of Mussina. Through archaeological survey and excavation on these settlements in the hinterland, the research will address the following questions:

- How is participation in regional economy expressed through systems of production and trade at settlements in the Mapungubwe hinterland?
- What social, economic and political networks link hinterland communities to one another in the Mapungubwe hinterland?

3. RESEARCH AIMS

The research hereby proposed seeks to:

- disentangle the dynamics of social organisation in the Mapungubwe period through the study of interaction between the hinterland communities
- provide a comprehensive understanding of political processes in the past through an analysis of social and political interaction and contestation from the perspective of peripheral communities
- refine conceptions of early politics by focusing on the relationship between larger scale social change and the daily practices carried out by common people who primarily populated the past.

4. RESEARCH SITES

This permit asks permission for research excavations to be conducted on MNR 61 and MNR76. Both sites were recorded by Mr. N. Kruger in 2004 as part of his MA degree research at the University of Pretoria. These sites potentially date to the Mapungubwe period and may therefore add invaluable data with regard to the interaction with its eastern hinterland.

The sites are located in the private Maremani Nature Reserve, located east of Messina. Consultation with Kruger and on-site inspection by Antonites and Kruger, identified two sites for possible excavations in 2013. These are:

MNR 76

22°28'23.70"S 30°18'22.00"E

This site is an Iron Age settlement situated on top of and against the slope of a low koppie. The site is roughly circular with a concentration of vitrified dung, prominently situated in the center. Mounds of ashy deposits surround this dung concentration, which suggests the location of middens. There are indications of a few free standing, low stone walls and isolated terracing. These are not well defined and mostly collapsed.

Cultural remains include undecorated potsherds, soapstone beads, glass beads and upper and lower grindstones. Survey of the site surface did not locate any chronologically diagnostic ceramics. However, the beads and vitrified dung may suggest a 10-14th century AD date for the site.

MNR 61

22°25'3.76"S 30°14'11.69"E

An Iron Age settlement located in the neck of a low koppie. Three small middens containing potsherds and burnt bone are visible on the surface. Other surface material culture includes decorated and undecorated potsherds and burnt bone. The ceramic sherds were non-diagnostic, which complicates relative dating.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Research will be organised around integrative research methodologies that are sensitive to tracing local and regional patterns of interaction. This will include excavation, survey and materials analysis (fauna, ceramics, metals, glass beads, etc.). Excavations will allow for comparison of features, artefacts, architecture and human activity, as well as changes in settlement organisation. Following recent approaches that emphasise greater data extraction from smaller excavations (Weiner, 2010), I will work at a scale that is manageable in terms of processing and analytical capacity.

Laboratory analyses will technologically and typologically analyse material recovered from sampling and excavation. The results will be applied to assess the collection in order to establish depositional integrity.

All data pertaining to the exercise will be included in a full report, which will comply with heritage legislation and a copy will be lodged with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). Recovered artefacts will be inventoried and curated according to conventional guidelines, which include storage at the University of Pretoria in storage facilities provided.

Analytical Methods

The research relies on the ability to securely establish the occupation history of MNR61 and MNR76, and to demonstrate the temporal overlap with the political development of regional capitols in the Limpopo River Valley. This necessitates an excavation and sampling strategy that is sensitive to the diachronic perspective needed to study hinterland reactions to variable processes of political and economic control. I aim to achieve this through a detailed excavation of natural layers, column sampling of soil profiles and obtaining secure contexts for dating the occupation sequences.

Furthermore, the study of spatially differentiated activities requires an approach that can identify archaeologically recognizable signs of repetition and change. I believe that horizontal exposure is the required excavation methodology for the recovery of such evidence. In generally surface observations of the sites suggests shallow archaeological deposits.

In addition to artefacts recovery through conventional techniques, excavations will also focus on recovering sediments for heavy fraction analysis. Artefacts less than 5mm in size generally yield additional data on activities such as lithic, shell and ivory working, and dietary information through faunal and botanical remains (Emery 2004; Hastorf 1988; Reitz and Wing 2008; Zohar and Belmaker 2005). I will collect 1liter samples from all loci. These will be floated off-site in the field during the excavation season.

Being cognizant of the fact that I want to relate the smaller scales of community and household to larger social structures I will employ a ceramic stylistic classification that builds on the recent methodological advances to South African ceramics made by Calabrese (2007). This stylistic analysis will be complimented XRF and petrographic analysis conducted at the University of Pretoria Ceramics Lab.

6. PROSPECTS AND PROJECT PLANNING

The research project will also serve as training for students from the University of Pretoria (UP) in archaeological fieldwork methods. The planned 2013 will provide students with the chance to participate in supervised archaeological excavations. The team consisting of Antonites (acting as Principal Investigator), UP staff members (as Field Directors) and UP archaeology students will undertake a controlled sampling of artefacts in archaeological deposits by using arbitrary criteria in the selection for sampling.

7. RESEARCH WORKPLAN

Date	Activity	Goal	Personnel
21-30 March	Test Excavations (MNR61 and MNR 76)	Preliminary excavations to evaluate research potential of archaeological site	Antonites, Ashley, Kruger; undergraduate and postgraduate students (University of Pretoria)
March – October	Primary analysis of excavated material (Pretoria)	Processing, cataloguing and analysis of excavated material	Antonites & students
November – February 2014	Compilation of Final Report	Compilation of final report from 2013 excavations.	Antonites

8. PREPARATION AND RELEVANT FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE

I recently completed a PhD dissertation through Yale university (Antonites 2012) on social and political interaction between the Mapungubwe heartland and its greater hinterland. Dissertation research during the summers of 2010 and 2011 was primarily conducted on the archaeological site Mutamba in the northern Soutpansberg. This research showed that The Mapungubwe hinterland was a region where class and power was expressed in a diversity of ways. The current research proposal is seen as a direct outflow of this project, and it is hoped, that the excavations on the Maremani Nature Reserve will expand on the findings and provide a more nuanced and complete view of the interaction in the Mapunubwe-world.

I also have extensive experience in conducting independent research prior to that of my PhD. In particular my MA research at the site of Baleni (Antonites 2005), as well as smaller phase I and II CRM projects in northern South Africa. In addition, I have participated in international field seasons in Bolivia (Dr. C. Hastorf, UC Berkley), Mongolia (Dr. W.H. Honeychurch, Yale) as well as South Africa.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Excavations and analysis of sites in the Maremani Game Reserve will help to approach the MIA political and social landscape as region as comprised of geographically separate but interacting communities. By using a paradigm that takes interaction patterns and the role of identity into account, the research will contribute to a more nuanced view of variability in the South African past. This project will contribute to debates concerning political interaction and contestation in early politics.

An additional outcome of the research project relates to capacity building and training. This research is crucial in exposing students to the primary archaeological methods and approaches through

fieldwork. This is an essential part of training of archaeology students and the cooperation with Maremani will greatly assist the University of Pretoria's aim in achieving this goal.

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