

## **Research on the Middle Iron Age, Maremani Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province**

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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 13<sup>th</sup> 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, east of Musina and located in the Maremani Nature Reserve.

MNR 76 was excavated in 2013 (see SAHRA Permit ID: 291) as part of this broader project. However, radiocarbon results and ceramic indicates that the site was occupied during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As such, whilst it provides a point of reference for understanding later changes in landscape use, the principal focus of this project remains the MIA. Therefore permission is requested for new excavations at MNR04, MNR 74, MNR 78 based on recent survey results that strongly indicate an MIA presence.

### **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 florescence, 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). However most of this research have focussed on the Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area (SLCA) at the expense of the wider Mapungubwe landscape. Although it is widely recognized that these hinterlands were crucial to the regional political economy, our understanding remains hampered by a lack of focussed research and data. The aim of this research project is to provide such evidence.

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 the MIA.

As such, this project will explore the MIA landscape of the Maremani Nature Reserve (MNR) located east of Musina and on the margins of the known Mapungubwe polity. Through archaeological survey and excavation of this hinterland, the research will address the following questions:

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

### **3. RESEARCH AIMS**

The research hereby proposed seeks to:

- Provide a data informed perspective on hinterland communities in the MIA through intensive study of the Maremani landscape.
- Explore local expressions of the Mapungubwe political economy in the Maremani landscape during the MIA.
- Situate Maremani within the MIA of northern South Africa with reference to the known political core of the SLCA.

### **4. RESEARCH SITES**

In order to fulfil the stated research goals we will take a landscape approach that will examine a range of sites across Maremani at a high spatio-chronological resolution. This contrasts with previous approaches that focus on long-lived large scale sites. This analytical scale allows fine grained analysis of micro patterning and exploring the connection within and between the hinterland. Permission is thus requested for research excavations on MNR04, MNR73 and MNR74. These three sites were originally recorded by Mr. N. Kruger in 2004 as part of his MA degree

research at the University of Pretoria. Subsequent surveys in 2013 and 2014 dated these sites to the Mapungubwe period.

#### **MNR 04**

**N -22.32917; E 30.1675**

This site is an Iron Age settlement situated on top of and against the slope of a low koppie that overlooks the Limpopo River. The site is small - less than 1ha in extent. There is a prominent concentration of vitrified dung against the southern slope. Ashy deposits suggests the location of a midden and chunks of burnt hut clay indicates surrounding huts. A partially buried, circular clay feature could be a forge.

Modern disturbances include a dirt road that bisects the site and leads to an informal lookout point over the Limpopo. The road cut has exposed the archaeological deposits leading to minimal erosion.

Surface finds include ceramic vessels and faunal remains and a clay figurine fragment. The surface ceramics typically were shouldered vessels decorated with triangular incisions on the shoulder. These suggest a 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> date for the site.

#### **MNR 74**

**N -22.46906; E 30.30906**

This is a settlement located at the western end of a low northeast-southwest running dolerite ridge. The site is small, roughly 30m at its widest. Deposits are mostly distributed around a boulder outcrop. The area roughly in the center is characterized by ashy soils, most likely a midden or kraal area. Surface material include ceramics, glass (black, yellow and blue) and shell beads, faunal remains, slag and spindle whorls. Several large ceramic fragments are visible in spaces between boulders. Most of the vessels seems to be shouldered pots, decorated with triangles, arcades and crosshatching incisions on the shoulder area. The ceramic and glass bead material all suggests that the dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### **MNR78**

**N -22.46597; E 30.31329**

This site is located on the summit of a koppie, itself part of a prominent northeast-southwest running ridge. At least two grain bin stands and a series of low stone platforms occurs close to the summit. In general though, the site is small with very little

surface material. A few ceramic fragments were however recovered which suggests that it potentially dates between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## 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 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 MNR04, MNR74 and MNR78, 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 10liter 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 2014 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
2014 – 2015	Test Excavations (MNR04 and MNR74)	Preliminary excavations to evaluate research potential of archaeological site	Antonites,; staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students (University of Pretoria)
2015	Analysis of excavated material (Pretoria)	Processing, cataloguing and analysis of excavated material	Antonites & students
2016	Compilation of Final Report to include MNR 04, MNR 74, MNR 78 and MNR 76 (SAHRA Permit ID: 291)	Compilation of final report from 2013-2015 excavations.	Antonites,

## 8. PREPARATION AND RELEVANT FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE

This project builds on previous research on social and political interaction between the Mapungubwe heartland and its greater hinterland which culminated in a PhD from Yale University (Antonites 2012).

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

Research of the Maremani landscape will expand our understanding of the hinterland communities during MIA. By adopting a multi-scalar landscape approach this research will provide a holistic yet nuanced perspective of the local socio-political dynamics within the context of the greater Mapungubwe landscape. 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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