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THE GOLDFIELDS THULAMELA PROJECT

A Report Prepared for National Parks Board

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INTRODUCTION

Sydney Miller was the archaeologist in charge of the excavations and reconstruction of Thulamela, sponsored by Goldfields, between July 1993 and May 1997. His report is not designed as an academic thesis but as a record accessible to staff in Kruger Park. The report largely succeeds. I have appended a list of some problems with grammar and spelling in the text. Here I comment on the format and interpretation of the sequence, radiocarbon dates, burials and settlement organisation. I end with suggestions for future research.

FORMAT

Miller includes illustrations from various publications for comparative purposes because Park staff are unlikely to locate the originals. The idea is useful, but some illustrations need more annotation. Figure 091, for example, includes drawings of pottery from Lydenburg while the caption suggests they should come from Silver Leaves. Further, the reason for some comparative material is not clear. The list of ¹⁴C results from some sites in Tanzania in Figure 095, for example, is of no value whatsoever without knowing what kind of pottery characterises each level at each site. Even then the list is probably irrelevant to Thulamela. Furthermore, Miller needs to be more careful about the implications of his choices. Figure 147, for example, suggests that 'P' walling existed at Tsindi by AD 1100, 200 years before its appearance at Great Zimbabwe. (In this case Rudd, the excavator at Tsindi, included a series of invalid radiocarbon results.) In Figure 094 Miller draws attention to a 'classical Mapungubwe' bowl shape in Tanzania as if there was a connection, when the same form occurs in Zhizo ceramics in Zimbabwe at an earlier period. Likewise, Gardner's interpretation of the ceramic sequence at Mapungubwe (Fig. 104) is misleading

and should be omitted. Schofield's drawing of Mapungubwe pottery, on the other hand, are most helpful, and more should be included. One critical omission is Loubser's (1991) monograph derived from his PhD project in Venda. His summary of ceramic classes is directly relevant to understanding the sequence at Thulamela.

EXCAVATIONS AT THULAMELA

The Archaeological Sequence

Archaeological work at Thulamela took second place to rebuilding. Nevertheless, the excavations uncovered important data and artefacts. Pottery styles in conjunction with stratigraphy shows that there were at least two major occupations.

Unfortunately, the figures showing the distribution of pottery by trench and level are not very useful because the decoration motifs are presented without reference to placement on a profile. Because of this problem, I examined the pottery from Trenches C2, 2D, 5A and 6A, stored at the National Culture History Museum. Most of the material from 6A, generally stratified under the back southern wall, belongs to Loubser's Mutamba group. It is probably Late Mutamba. Mutamba is closely related to K2 and to Gumanye (Zimbabwe Period II) in Zimbabwe. More of this pre-walling pottery occurs in the bottom layers of 5A and 2C. Some pottery might be Late Mapungubwe but the sample is too small. The rest of the ceramic collection belongs to the Zimbabwe Tradition, and probably to the Khami phase.

Small bits of Zimbabwe pottery occur in level 14 below the back wall in 2C, but it is not abundant until level 9, at the base of the wall. The same sequence occurs in 5A: some Zimbabwe pottery lay below the wall, but it markedly increased in level 9 at the wall base. This distribution suggests that Midden A is a Zimbabwe feature that began to form when the wall was constructed.

Radiocarbon Dates

This sequence helps to interpret the radiocarbon dates. Most dates come from

Trenches 2C and 2D in Midden A. (It would be helpful if the location of the dated material could be shown on the relevant section drawings.) These dates, incidentally, should always be presented as a range, as Miller usually does, rather than as a midpoint. Contrary to common opinion, midpoints are not the most likely date, and they give a spurious sense of accuracy. Figure 454 should therefore give whole spans.

By considering the whole span, Mutamba pottery appears to date to between AD 1235 and 1440 (Figure 1). A combined estimate of this pre-walling phase can be calculated by simply averaging the beginning of each span and then the end of each. It is not clear on present evidence if the dates from layer 13 in 2C and 2D predate the wall. (Their span falls within the next higher group.) If they do not belong, then the average estimate for the pre-walling phase is AD 1365 to 1405. If the date from 2D levels 17/18 is disregarded, because it is aberrant, then the average becomes 1390 to 1430. By the same process Midden A began at about AD 1465 and ended at about 1640. This sequence is somewhat different from Miller's interpretation on page 184. The following table summarises the differences:

Phases	Miller's Interpretation	Revised Dates
Second Walling Phase	ca. AD 1600	-
First Walling Phase	ca. AD 1350	ca. AD 1465
Pre-walling Phase	ca. AD 1200	1365-1405, 1390-1430; or 1235-1440

Whatever the best interpretation, there is no present evidence that walling began before the mid 15th century. This point affects comments on pages 250 and 270.

Midden A does not necessarily date the whole Zimbabwe occupation. The bottom levels may date the beginning, but the front wall of the palace needs to be dated to confirm the estimate, while samples from the upper levels in several places are needed to date the end. The porcelain in Midden G suggests the site lasted longer than 1640.

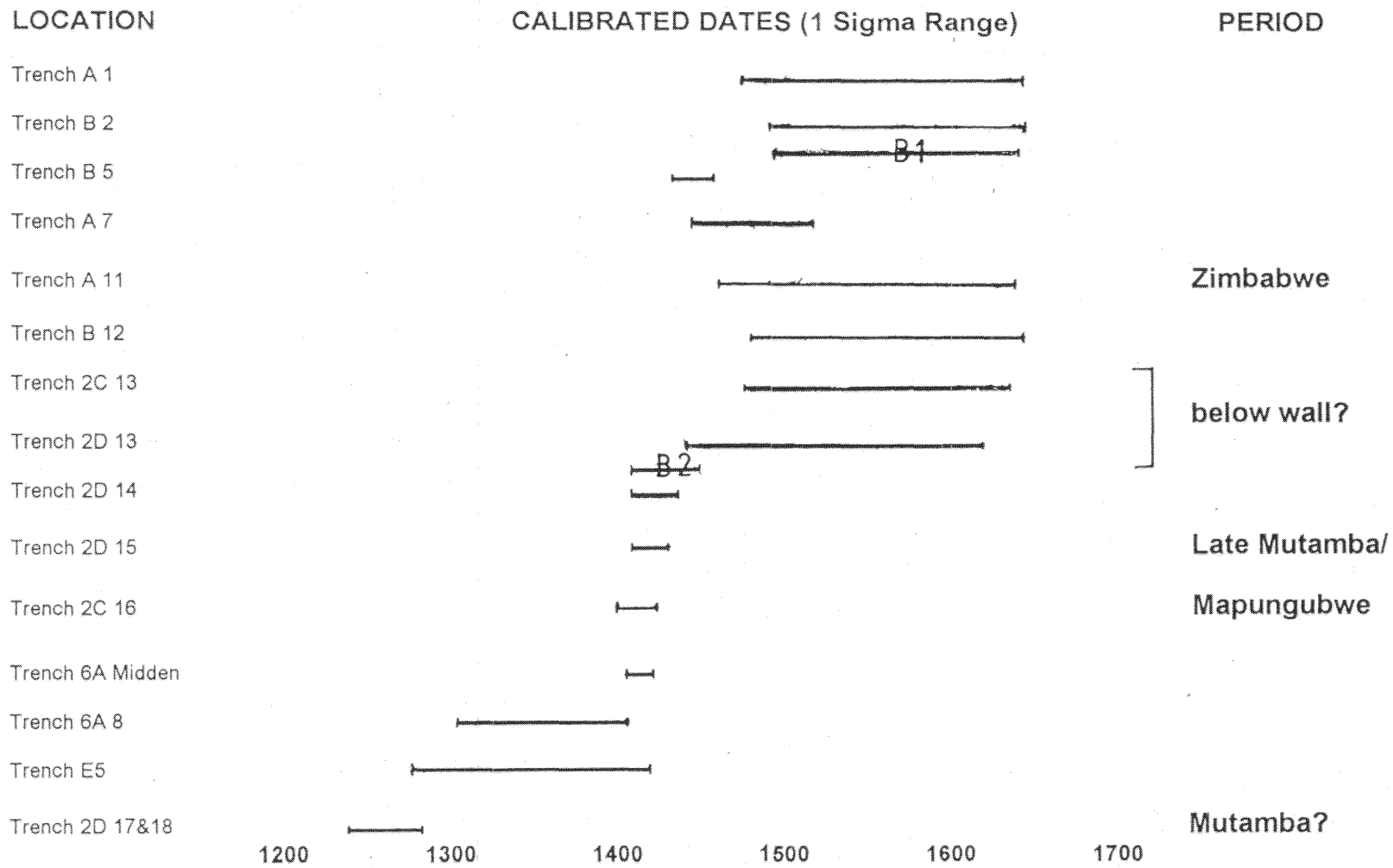


Figure 1. Radiocarbon Dates from Thulamela

The Burials

Although the complete dating of Thulamela remains for future research, the framework established by the excavations is nevertheless sufficient to highlight the ambiguity between the burials. In the case of Burial 1 (UP 43) the Pretoria result is superior to that from Harvard, and Burial 1 clearly dates to the walling phase. Burial 2 (UP 44), on the other hand, dates to the pre-walling phase. It was therefore unlikely to have been the first ruler at Thulamela as Miller and his colleagues speculate (p. 312).

At the time of Burial 2, the hut in E14 appears to have been converted to a solid platform that was never used again. This suggests that the skeleton had been removed from its original burial location (at this point it was probably already a 'secondary' burial) and placed in the pfamo at the end of Thulamela's occupation. Alternatively, the burial, and burial hut, may have been placed in the ruin to re-establish a claim when newcomers, such as the Shangaan-Thonga, moved into the area. A better chronology is need to clarify this point.

Settlement Organisation

The identity of Burial 2 depends on one's interpretation of Enclosure 14. Miller (p. 250) proposes that E14 and E13 served similar purposes; that is, both areas contained huts for chiefs that later became tombs. Elsewhere (p.271) Miller identifies E9 as another pfamo and the hut remains between E10 and E12 as the audience chamber.

Miller's comments on p. 272 about 'special recipes' shows that he is out of his depth with settlement analyses. First, philosophers of science demonstrated long ago that it is not possible to induce an answer from excavated data. One instead must apply competing hypotheses--Miller's 'special recipes'--to the data and see which has the best 'fit'. Miller's own special recipe is based on DuPlessis' description of Mphephu's existing capital and Van der Waal's description of Khaku's capital. Neither of these descriptions, however, present an analysis of underlying rules, and both capitals postdate settlement changes caused by the difagane. The ZAR, in fact, forced Mphephu to build his royal

settlement in the open, away from defensible mountains. The specific organisation of these two examples are therefore not directly relevant to Thulamela.

Moreover, these two capitals characterise the Venda specifically. Thulamela, however, is pre-Venda, and its affinities are with the Zimbabwe culture. The Zimbabwe culture, one should remember, encompassed the people who later became Venda, while Venda is a specific ethnic expression of the wider cultural tradition.

The model for the Zimbabwe culture (derived from an examination of over 49 sites), shows that the Thulamela palace would have had one section reserved for the chief, containing his pfamo and audience chamber, and another section for the senior sister. The sharp ridge on the front wall (p. 231) shows that E13 and E14 belongs to the chief's section, while E10 and E12 were part of the senior sister's area. The openness of E13 and the complexity of the hut shows that this was most likely the audience chamber. It may have later been used a burial chamber, as Miller speculates, but its original purpose was unlikely to have been a pfamo. The pfamo was most likely E14, the most secluded and protected enclosure in the palace. Further, the pile of river cobbles points to 'pool' symbolism appropriate to the pfamo. The presence of Burial 2 also strengthens this identification.

Other aspects of Miller's spatial interpretations are also problematic. The path to a Venda chief's area, for example, is marked by sharpened sticks on wall tops, and they lead all the way up through the wives' area. The monoliths Miller believes served the same purpose, however, are at the base of E1 and they do not continue. Rather than this stick-lined path, most other Zimbabwe palaces have a steep ascent to the chief's area from the court. I believe there used to be such a staircase leading up between E12 and E13.

Miller thinks E1 and E2 were occupied by the first wife and her children, but this is a secluded area marked by monoliths unlike any first wife's palace elsewhere.

E17 is a better candidate for this function because of its more public location and possible reception area in front. Further excavations, however, are needed to confirm any identification.

Miller's identification of E16 as the thondo is likewise at variance with other examples. There should be two entrances to a thondo, and one should be guarded and more-or-less hidden. In more recent Venda settlements, the thondo is usually on the west side of the entrance to the court, rather than the left as Miller states. E16, then, appears to be a poor choice for several reasons.

The following table summarises the two alternative interpretations. In most cases further excavations could help clarify the functions of individual structures.

Enclosure	Miller's Interpretation	Zimbabwe Pattern
E13	<u>pfamo</u>	audience chamber
E14	<u>pfamo</u>	<u>pfamo</u>
E18	kitchen and messengers	soldiers
E19	--	kitchen
E15	meeting place for men; metal working	ritual; young wives
E11	young wives	young wife
E1/E2	first wife	confinement
E17	--	first wife
E16	<u>thondo</u>	#2 man
E3	<u>tshivambo</u>	<u>tshivambo</u>
E10/E12	audience chamber of chief	audience chamber of senior sister
E9	last <u>pfamo</u>	associated with senior sister

RECONSTRUCTION

Most effort during the Goldfields project was placed on rebuilding the stone walls, and Miller is to be congratulated on this arduous work. I have no doubt that he and his team carried out the task in a first-class manner.

The report on this part of the project (p. 437-474) appears to have been prepared as a separate paper for publication. Whatever the case, it is less useful for the purposes of the report than the accompanying photographs. These annotated pictures provide the important information. A separate addendum promises to provide more, but it was not available.

One major aspect is missing in this section. Many want to know how many man-hours it took originally to build the different enclosures. The answer is of interest to tourists as well as academics, and even estimates would be useful.

Considering the importance of the reconstruction to the overall project, this section should have more in it. If necessary, some of the less relevant comparative material could be omitted to provide more space.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Thulamela

For tourist purposes, the functions of several enclosures need to be established. It would be appropriate to start with the probable senior sister's area: that is, E9, E10 and E12. The probable #2 man's enclosure, E16, should also be excavated. In all cases, the entire enclosures need to be examined: narrow trenches are not helpful. Hopefully, some of these excavations will yield charcoal associated with the final occupation. In this first phase one should also reconstruct (or construct) the stairway to the palace. Later, the functions of other areas can be investigated.

For scientific purposes, the pre-walling period needs further research. A larger ceramic sample would probably help to determine the relationship between Mutamba and Mapungubwe. Some of the middens under the palace walls, such as Midden C and Midden F, should be excavated. Large-scale excavations in E15 could clarify the nature of the pre-wall occupation.

Beyond Thulamela

The relationship between Thulamela, Makahayne and Matjigwili is not clear.

Excavations at these sites should therefore be designed to yield the beginning and end of the Zimbabwe occupations. Furthermore, since Makahayne appears to have better preservation and a large pre-walling deposit, more attention should be paid there to that period.

The most enigmatic site in the area is 2231 AC 11, Verwaalkop. It is unusual in that the walling is close to the edge of the hill and the few daga structures there stood to the side and behind. The walling therefore faced the wrong direction. This reversal needs to be investigated.

APPENDIX: Comments on the Text

The text needs comprehensive editing, for there are a number of awkward passages and mistakes in subject-verb agreement. Furthermore, all pages should be numbered, all figures should at least have a number under them, and where appropriate (such as the maps in Figs. 008-011) each figure should have a reference. References in the text should have dates, and they should all appear in the bibliography. Some maps need north arrows and legends. For purposes of diplomacy and effectiveness, derogatory remarks about the National Parks Board and Kruger Park should be omitted. Some common spelling errors are the following: van Warmeloo instead of van Warmelo; artifacts instead of artefacts; dagha instead of daga or dhaka; Shaitowitch instead of Saitowitz; Gardiner instead of Gardner; State instead of Stayt.

The following list refers to specific pages:

- Preface, para. 4, line 2: insert not after excuse;
- p.2, para. 6, New Zealand;
point (f), explain why;
- p. 8, what about flooding?;
- p. 9, para. 2, Nigeria/Cameroon Area, rather than Congo;
- p. 10, para. 4, Sinclair 1982, rather than Duarte;
- p. 27, para. 2, how has Chinese celadon and porcelain influenced local pottery?;
- p. 28, para. 1, what problems and what models?;
- p. 31, para. 2, the furnace at Chisvingo is later than the walling;

- p. 31, para. 5, title should be changed to "Sites in the Thulamela Area";
Fig. 079, where is Frampton?;
p. 79, para. 6, meaning unclear;
p. 79, para. 7, what is the point?;
Fig. 134, not an official map, it was my working plan;
p. 141, top, there needs to be a bold title "Thulamela Excavations";
p. 142, the stones that are not monoliths should be put in a separate section;
there needs to be a plan showing monoliths by number, as Fig. 002 is insufficient;
Fig. 164, is this ML1?;
Fig. 167, is this the original position of ML3?;
p. 169, para. 2, CP 10 is an example of band-and-panel ware;
p. 169, para. 3, there should be drawings of all pots from E14;
p. 170, why is the number of spindle whorls unusual?;
Figs. 201-204, need captions and numbers;
p. 184, para. 4, the profiles of TS 2A and 2B do not show the wall resting on an older midden;
p. 184, para. 6(a), referring to the pre-wall occupation as 'Thulamela people' will only cause confusion;
p. 185, para. 3, is on top of an earlier midden but Fig. 230 does not show it clearly;
p. 185, para. 7, the discard deposit does not have to be near the original activity;
Fig. 226, vertical and horizontal scales do not match;
Fig. 227, levels needed;
Fig. 229, levels needed, this will clarify the apparent discrepancy between the section drawings;
Fig. 230, levels needed;
Fig. 238, missing;
p. 231, para. 9, if this sharp edge is original, then it is similar to Khami, Dhlodhlo and Kubiku;
p. 233, para. 4, the spears could also have been staffs of office;
Fig. 262, needs a section or profile;

p. 271, para. 1, how does gold indicate men?;

Fig. 287, Angola, not Zimbabwe, but what is the relevance?;

Fig. 289, what comparison do you want to make?;

Fig. 291, house rather than homestead;

p. 299, para. 1, the gong does not indicate trade with West Africa. Gongs are made throughout Central Africa, including Zambia;

p. 300, para. 3, the Harvard date with a +/- 160 is useless;

p. 300, para. 4, the variation in burials by status, sex and circumstances is not useless information-it is the point to know. What reliable literature demonstrates that axial orientation points to the place of origin?;

p. 302, para. 1, the last point is utter speculation;

p. 302, para. 2, line 4, add ...count of Burial 1 in...;

Fig. 309, what is the circle of stones?;

p. 309, para. 2, last point is unclear. Surely the evidence indicates that the structure was the chief's hut and only later used as a tomb;

p. 310, para. 2, this was probably a tertiary burial. Trench 6A yielded mostly pre-walling pottery and it is therefore unlikely that the phalanx could have come from Burial 2;

p. 312, para. 2, Southern Africa should be South Africa. A gold burial was excavated from the Musimbira ruins in Zimbabwe (Monroe and Spies 1975);

p. 312, para. 3, the mark on the 3rd lumbar vertebra mentioned on p. 311 is hardly evidence for ritual suicide. This is the kind of speculation that becomes fact and should be omitted;

p. 312, para. 4, highly speculative without any evidential support;

Fig. 345, applique rather than embossed;

p. 331, point 5, not quite accurate;

Fig. 350, where was this pot found? It belongs to the Mutamba style;

Fig. 353, these are 'ribbed' pieces rather than zoomorphic;

Fig. 362, which pot is from E10 and which from E12?;

Fig. 367, Middens A and C rather than D;

Fig. 368, the pottery drawings need profiles to be useful;

Fig. 372, with which drawing is the bottom profile associated?;

Fig. 375, what is a profile fall?;

- Figs. 379-386, for future reference, the motif drawings are too generalised to be of much use and they should be combined with profiles;
- p. 372, para. 4, what is the evidence that gold was mined in the Giyani area during Thulamela times?;
- Fig. 387, the tong is actually a hammer;
- Fig. 414, recent work by N.J. van der Merwe suggests that the tall furnaces did not work as well as the small ones found in southern Africa;
- Fig. 419, insert possible iron blank;
- p. 407-408, caption needed;
- p. 413, highly speculative that glass beads had greater value than gold beads;
- p. 415, the Mapungubwe group of beads needs to be designated in the table;
- p. 416, why is the glass bead report presented as a set of figures? is this the same as the addendum on beads?;
- Fig. 444, para. 5, a table is needed;
- Figs. 447 and 448 should be together;
- p. 431, last date is incorrectly calibrated;
- p. 432, last Harvard date has an incorrect lab number;
- Fig. 454, Harvard dates have not been calibrated;
- is there a second midden near TS6A?;
- the full range should be presented as spans, not as midpoints;
- Fig. 463, what is 'twanging'?;
- Figs. 476-481, it is unnecessary to repeat step 1;
- Fig. 528, lower valley, not acropolis;
- Fig. 533, this entrance has been rebuilt;
- Fig. 549, caption on wrong page;
- p. 513-514, the discussion and conclusions contain a lot of innuendo and reference to data not in the text;
- p. 520, why the references to the Harare, Ingombe Ilede and Inyanga traditions?