

## Book Reviews

### Boekresensies

#### New Light on Dark History?

**Thomas N. Huffman, *Mapungubwe: Ancient African Civilisation on the Limpopo***

Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2005

62 pp

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R95.00

Want to know more about Mapungubwe? After being kept in darkness for almost half a century, you now have a choice of three very different books to enlighten yourself on the subject and satisfy your curiosity.

Firstly Mary Leslie and Tim Maggs' edited volume, *African Naissance, the Limpopo valley 1000 years ago* – published by the professional society in the Goodwin Series – offers a scientific account of the widest variety of data relevant to the archaeology of the Limpopo basin.<sup>1</sup> It contains a resume discussion of the main sites; relates the latest on carbon dating; revisits pottery classification and faunal remains; traces trade through beadwork *et cetera*. This is the textbook you have always wanted for application in the classroom.

Sian Tiley's *Mapungubwe: South Africa's Crown Jewels*, on the other hand, is the kind of glossy, hard-cover, coffee-table book, which you promptly remove from your desk when the kids arrive in your study.<sup>2</sup> Inside awaits a reasonably detailed discussion of the Mapungubwe saga, a brief social history of the chance discovery, early exploitation and scientific exploration of the site. The illustrations are stunning and the text is pure intellectual entertainment, bound to satisfy the historically-minded readers.

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1. M. Leslie and T. Maggs (eds), "African Naissance: The Limpopo Valley 1000 Years Ago", *Goodwin Series*, 8, (The South African Archaeological Society, Cape Town, 2000).
  2. S. Tiley, *Mapungubwe South Africa's Crown Jewels* (Sunbird Publishing, Cape Town, 2004).

And then there is the subject of this review – Huffman’s *Mapungubwe: Ancient African Civilisation on the Limpopo*, an unpretentious booklet, compiled by *the* authority on the prehistory of the Great Zimbabwe epoch. Aimed at the general public, it will, no doubt, appeal to the inquisitive visitors to the site.

At last, a well-illustrated, popular kind of publication to match the didactic museum materials produced by Garlake and other progressive intellectuals north of the Limpopo twenty years ago. Huffman’s text, however, lacks the political flavour of its northern counterparts. He remains faithful to his scientific-academic writing style.

If you are looking for an essay-type presentation, look elsewhere (I suggest Tiley). The text is essentially image-based and lacks an explicit narrative. Rather, it reads like one of those National Geographic fold-out supplements, without the glamour, which is not to say that the recipe does not work. The selected photographs are appealing and the quality of printing is satisfactory. The maps, diagrams and line-drawings are instructive. Tired of that same boring aerial photograph of a bare, dehumanised Mapungubwe hill? Your prayers for an artistic, three-dimensional reconstruction of the site have finally been heard!

South Africa is truly privileged in that it is able to offer the world three great archaeological narratives. The *Ancient African Civilisation on the Limpopo*, is one of them. It speaks of the origins and growth of an early urban society and of inter-continental trade *avant-la-lettre*. The sister stories – The “Cradle of Mankind” and “Shamanic Voices” – draw on an extensive and diverse fossil collection and on the equally opulent artistic heritage of the San. All three appear, rightfully, on that exclusive World Heritage list.

Huffman’s text basically consists of small units, one to three pages in length. Each unit is developed around a key word with a photograph, diagram or map, and a short discussion. These provide the building blocks for an exciting, but largely implicit, narrative of a social revolution that took place eight hundred years ago.

The material presented by the author portrays the socio-economic and political reshaping of society that took place in the Limpopo Valley. The site lay-out and the artefacts of Schroda, K2, Mapungubwe, and subsequently of Great Zimbabwe and Khami, suggest that egalitarian communities of pastoralists, slowly made way for a new, divided society of commoners and royalty, of periphery and capital. This story of

growing distance between ruled and rulers and of territorial and political expansion emerged from Huffman's laborious fieldwork in the nineteen eighties and nineties.

The prehistory of Mapungubwe, incidentally, is only a chapter in Huffman's much wider and more ambitious life-project: the archaeology of Great Zimbabwe. For this, the author depends heavily on anthropological theory and ethnographic analogy. His work has been labelled cognitive, symbolic, structural and interpretative archaeology. It is, in fact, primarily "living archaeology" or ethno-archaeology, a paradigm that makes artefacts from an unknown, distant past speak through the mediation of ethnographic parallels from the present.

Many archaeologists have welcomed this approach, especially those who, including myself, supported the 1970s aphorism: "Archaeology is Anthropology or it is nothing". The concept of a Central Cattle Pattern, for example, is borrowed from structuralist anthropology. For an understanding of the logic underlying the spatial arrangements of royal settlements, Huffman relies heavily on ethnography of the Venda speaking region.

However, it is equally true that "Anthropology without History is nothing", and those who ignore this truism may end up depicting a past ignorant of historical discontinuity, social complexity, cultural variation, ambiguity and contradiction. *Ancient African Civilisation on the Limpopo* – not unlike *Snakes and Crocodiles*<sup>3</sup> – in my opinion, exemplifies the uncritical "snapshot" approach to analogy.

In Huffman's discourse the use of monolithic entities such as "African culture" or "Southern Bantu culture" are seemingly unproblematic (this is testified by phrases such as "throughout Southern Africa"; "throughout the Eastern Bantu speaking world"; "as a rule"; "as elsewhere"). Bantu society is uniformly declared patriarchal and patrilineal (what has happened to Venda's dual descent kinship system?). Society is characterised by a simple male-female dichotomy (no place for gender fluidity or complementarity).

Languages do not change, so they can be traced through pottery styles. Symbolic codes in the architecture are shared throughout the subcontinent and persist throughout the last millennium. All kings have

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3. T. Huffmann, *Snakes & Crocodiles Power and Symbolism in Ancient Zimbabwe* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1996).

wooden doors (but only half a dozen doors, none of which look alike, make up the Venda “tradition” of royal decorated doors). Most amazing of all, kings, their wives, mothers and aunties, bards and bodyguards, diviners and anybody else in the universe finds his or her exact, logical place in the royal settlement. Seemingly, there is very little in the Limpopo basin that cannot be explained with the help of ethnographic data. No “maybes”, “ors” and “ifs”. And, more importantly, no debate.

Maybe I am being unfair, if one considers the fact that this booklet was only intended to be a field guide? Maybe the unriddling of archaeological mysteries is what the general public wants? As I said before, the average visitor to the site will be more than satisfied ...

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