

Mapungubwe Reconsidered:

A Living Legacy

Exploring Beyond
the Rise and Decline
of the
Mapungubwe State

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Preface

The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) conducts research on strategic issues pertinent to the development of South Africa. Its focus includes efforts to unlock the full meaning of historical experiences and their relevance to the present and the future. In humbly deciding on the name of the Institute, the founders of MISTRA were inspired by the knowledge, only now emerging in its full splendour, of a community that inhabited the environs of the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers in the 10th to 14th centuries (AD). The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape is one of the profound treasures of southern Africa's social and archaeological history, appropriately declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in 2003. Contained within this landscape is indispensable information on precolonial state formation, social hierarchies, architecture of stone-walled towns, mineral processing and intercontinental trade.


And yet, the Mapungubwe state rose, towered over its environs, and then declined – long before European colonial incursions. What exactly were the social dynamics in this polity? What technologies did it utilise? How did it relate to neighbouring communities and to societies further afield? Indeed, why was this 'civilisation' unable to sustain itself? In this combined edition of two MISTRA publications, now jointly titled *Mapungubwe Reconsidered: A Living Legacy*, MISTRA seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge about Mapungubwe, straddling such issues as the relationships between humans and the environment, management of mineral endowments and the form and impact of southern Africa's global intercourse in this historical period. Beyond these issues are profound social constructs about state legitimacy, quality of leadership, social stratification, gender relations and the consequences of material self-gratification.

The decision to combine the two publications derives from the appreciation that, while *Mapungubwe Reconsidered* provided an analysis of various dynamics in Mapungubwe society, *A Living Legacy* presented a quasi-sequential historical narrative about the evolution of that society. In this regard, it was felt that the two booklets complemented one another and would better serve the reader in one package.

Mapungubwe Reconsidered: A Living Legacy combines methodologies of archaeology, political science, economic history and international relations to weave, in a unique way, a storyline that enriches current knowledge on the history of southern Africa. This transdisciplinary approach is immeasurably enhanced not only by the cooperation among experts located in various universities but also through entangling, in an unusual embrace, the methodologies of academia, policy-planning and community treasures of knowledge contained in oral history.

And so, through workshops, colloquia, conferences and peer review processes, detailed papers have emerged examining the dynamic nature of geographic borders and citizenship, centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in nation formation, trade and production, and an environmental heritage of challenge and promise.

If this initiative attempts to prompt a 'reconsideration' of the Mapungubwe experience, it is not because it posits entirely new data. Rather it builds on existing knowledge in a



collaborative journey of unlocking the riddles of our past. There is no doubt that new information and analyses will emerge in future on Mapungubwe and other such settlements in southern Africa. How we utilise all this knowledge, as a basis for an unending process of knowledge generation – and how society disseminates it in formal and informal ways through our educational institutions, the arts and our innovation systems – will define whether we are worthy inheritors of the Mapungubwe relay-baton. Indeed, whether we succeed in transforming the Mapungubwe Heritage Site and similar locations into centres of knowledge will determine whether our efforts to improve the human condition endure, grounded on the firm foundation of knowledge that is as indigenous in location as it is global in application.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the researchers who were involved in the drafting of the two publications and in synthesising the information into this combined edition. Similar thanks go to the extended team who offered counsel throughout the evolution of the project, the reviewers who critiqued the work, and the generous donors who have made this project and other MISTRA undertakings possible.

Joel Netshitenzhe
MISTRA Executive Director