

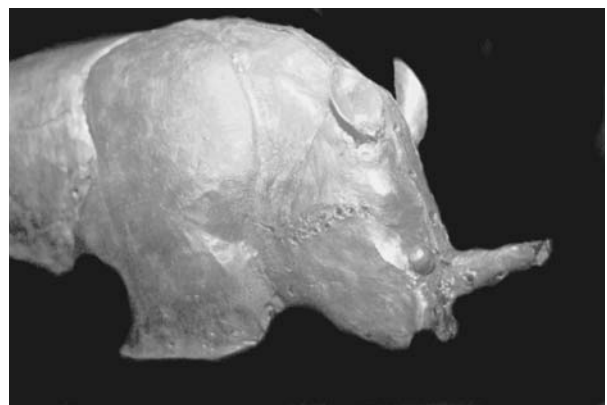
# *The Mapungubwe Collection, University of Pretoria*

The University of Pretoria has had the honour of being the custodian of the declared national treasures of the Mapungubwe Collection for the six decades since its discovery, which has coincided with a seventy-year archaeological project conducted by the university. The Mapungubwe Collection resides under the auspices of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge, and the museum is managed by Cultural Affairs at the University of Pretoria, which has been tasked with promoting the collection for academic, research, education and tourism purposes. The Mapungubwe Collection, furthermore, acts as an advocate for museums in tertiary institutions, and sets a minimum standard for other museums that house national heritage collections, in terms of collection management, security, conservation and exhibition. Foreign advice concerning the Mapungubwe exhibition was sought from the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the British Museum in London, and the collection consequently conforms with international museological standards.

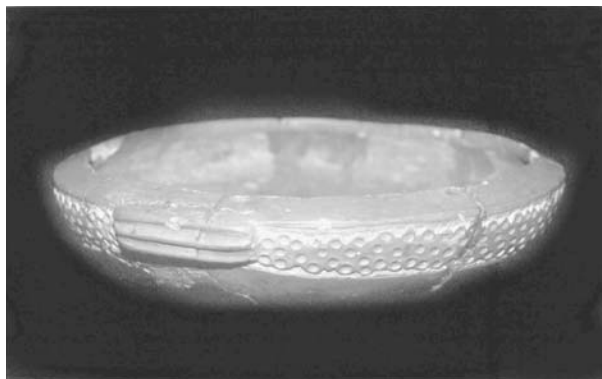
The Mapungubwe Collection is renowned for what has become one of the greatest cultural icons in recent times, namely the gold rhinoceros **(1)**, discovered on a hilltop in 1933 as part of the remnants of a royal burial. This thousand-year-old archaeological collection consists of gold ornaments, copper, iron, refined ivory, bone, trade glass beads, and Chinese celadon and ceramic ware **(2, 3)**. It has become one of the most significant

cultural collections in South Africa today. The images of initiatory ceramic figurines **(4)**, and indigenous beads **(5)** and gold from one of the oldest southern African trade kingdoms have inspired jewellery designs and numerous contemporary artworks.

Obviously skilled in technologies advanced for their time, the people of Mapungubwe left distinct traces of highly organised tribal governance, artistic creativity and commercial competence. The people were once ruled by a powerful king, whose kingdom traded in ivory and gold with the Swahili from the east coast of Africa and with other merchants from as far away as Egypt, India and China. Mapungubwe produced some of the finest gold artworks found on the southern African continent.



1 Gold rhinoceros circa AD 1220, excavated in 1933, found in a royal grave on Mapungubwe Hill, Limpopo Valley. 15,2 cm × 4,2 cm × 5,5 cm. (Courtesy of the University of Pretoria: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Mapungubwe Collection).



2 Terracotta bowl found in royal grave on Mapungubwe Hill, Limpopo Valley, in 1934. 22,2 × 6 cm. (Courtesy of the University of Pretoria: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Mapungubwe Collection).

No one knows the name of the people who lived at Mapungubwe, where they came from, what language they spoke, or why, after apparently thriving in the Limpopo River valley for more than 250 years, they decided to leave. But what is now known as the Mapungubwe Kingdom, is emerging as one of the country's most important prehistoric symbols in post-apartheid South Africa. It is easy to see how Mapungubwe slumbered unnoticed for nearly a thousand years. For centuries, Mapungubwe Hill was shrouded in superstition, since local tribes believed that the ruins possessed supernatural powers. People were consequently afraid to look at Mapungubwe directly, and so no one climbed the hill, fearing that they would disturb the ancestors.

The gold objects of adornment and ritual survived the natural elements, and centuries of possible pillaging. The skilfully crafted gold objects like the sceptre, the rhinoceros and necklaces, functioned in a symbolic manner to emphasise the status and power of the sacred leaders. Hammered, engraved, coiled, pierced and cast gold was fashioned into ornaments and tacked with minute gold nails

onto wooden cores that have since decayed. Obscurity still surrounds these funerary ornaments, as even today there is controversy surrounding the way in which the gold artefacts were manufactured and what purpose they served.

The delicate aesthetics of these African works of art is still awe-inspiring. Fine, pure gold plate was cut to form narrow strips of flat wire that was twisted into a spiral around a bundle of plant fibre, which has since disintegrated, thus leaving only a hollow gold coil. Thousands of gold beads (6) have been recovered from Mapungubwe, where one burial alone yielded 18 000 gold beads that had perhaps been strung into necklaces that were worn by a woman of high status. Some beads were manufactured by the technique of punching, and others were wrapped by means of bending pieces of gold wire into loops. Large groups of gold beads were also made by casting them individually, and some were decorated with grooves. The ivory and bone were refined and decorated, and then fashioned into ivory hairpins and bone needles for sewing skins; spindle whorls were cut from



3 Hand-moulded ceramic pot, Mapungubwe Hill, Limpopo Valley. Found at K2 in 1936. 20 × 10 cm. (Courtesy of the University of Pretoria: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Mapungubwe Collection).



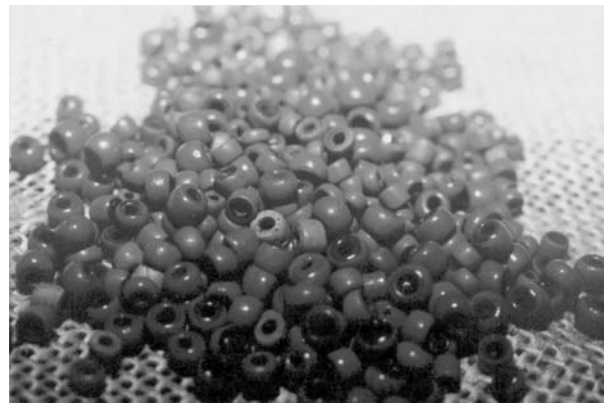
4 Symbolic initiatory ceramic figurine from K2, Limpopo Valley. 6 × 2,3 cm. (Courtesy of the University of Pretoria: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Mapungubwe Collection).

ceramic shards or stone, and were incised and used in the production of cotton. It is no wonder that Mapungubwe reflected a wealthy, powerful trading kingdom and is often referred to as the Eldorado of southern Africa.

In his speeches and writings regarding the significance of Mapungubwe, South African President Thabo Mbeki touts Mapungubwe's sophisticated achievements in art and international trade as evidence of Africa's greatness long before Europeans arrived on the continent. According to Mbeki, 'The source of our power comes not only from our present, but also from our past, wherein the people of our land were seriously engaged in efforts to better the quality of their lives through the use and continuous improvement of technology.'

The democratisation of South Africa and the leading role it has since taken on the African continent have sparked a new and exciting move towards the exploration, preservation and enunciation of all things essentially African, under the auspices of the African Renaissance. In the spirit of this, and in answer to

growing national and international recognition of the significance of Mapungubwe, the University of Pretoria publicly launched the permanent exhibition of the Mapungubwe Collection in 2000. The collection is known as the SASOL African Heritage Exhibition in acknowledgement of the financial assistance provided by that organisation and by Dr Anton Rupert. Dr Ben Ngubane, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, stated at the unveiling of the collection in June 2000: 'It is my belief that Mapungubwe has profound implications for educating South Africans

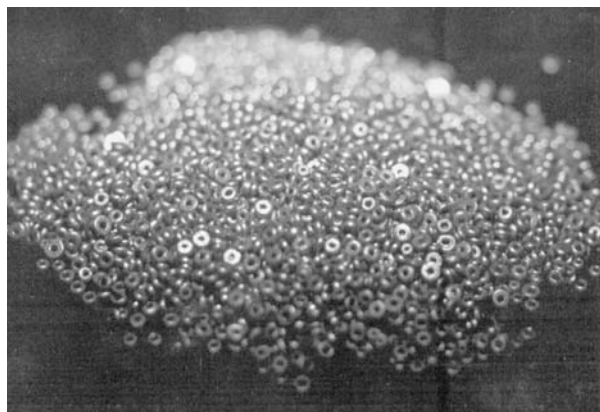


5 Imported Indian Red trade glass beads, Mapungubwe Hill, Limpopo Valley. (Courtesy of the University of Pretoria: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Mapungubwe Collection).

about the advanced state of development of African people at a time when apartheid education contended that they were essentially simply hunters and gatherers.' Ngubane, furthermore, claimed that 'the value of this exhibition in creating a space where our people and interested visitors from around the world can experience the wonders of Mapungubwe is immeasurable and contributes both to our vision of the past and our work as a nation for the future.'

In one of the earliest accounts of Mapungubwe, *The Illustrated London News* of 8 April 1933 announced a 'remarkable discovery in the Transvaal: a grave of unknown origin, containing much gold-work, found on the summit of natural rock stronghold in a wild region.' Today the two exceptional Iron Age sites, Mapungubwe and K2, and a related site situated on the borders between South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe and at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers, form part of a newly developed Transfrontier Peace Park. This park is currently called the Vhembe Dongola National Park, and has recently been listed for National and World Heritage nomination. The area will also be a sanctuary for viable populations of some of the most threatened mammals on earth, such as black and white rhino, wild dog, cheetah and elephant. The breathtaking scenery is enhanced by the unique sandstone formations, high botanical and zoological diversity, and culturally rich rock art environment.

The Mapungubwe Collection will not only capture the interest and attention of academics and historians, but it is also essential viewing for anyone interested in gaining a greater understanding of South Africa's past. The national cultural treasures of the Mapungubwe Collection are on permanent display,



6 Gold beads from grave, circa AD 1220 Mapungubwe Hill, Limpopo Valley. (Courtesy of the University of Pretoria: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Mapungubwe Collection).

and are housed in the Old Arts Building, itself a national monument, on the main campus of the University of Pretoria.

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