

### The Hill of the Jackal

Mapungubwe, the Place of the Jackal, lies on a hilltop near the confluence of the Limpopo and the Shashi rivers, where the Republic of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana meet. The rediscovery of this ancient citadel is a tale worth retelling.

In 1927 a farmer of the area, a certain E.S.J. van Graan, came to hear about a man called Lottering, who lived the hermit's life on the banks of the Limpopo. Apparently this Lottering had brought down a clay pot off a nearby granite outcrop, a *koppie*, of a style unlike that of any contemporary local earthenware. In 1932 Van Graan, his son and three friends located the *koppie*. The son of a local chief named Mowena revealed the secret path to the summit and there, amongst the potsherds, copper bangles and glass trade beads, the men found a trove of artefacts, including the famed golden rhinoceros. They shared the bounty five ways between them, just like Rhodes' agents when they discovered Great Zimbabwe. But here the story has a happier ending. The Van Graan lad, a student at the University of Pretoria, realizing that the finds were of scientific importance, brought them to the attention of one of the professors of archaeology there. As a result the land was secured by the government, the bounty retrieved by the university's Department of Archaeology, and excavations commenced.

The people who occupied Mapungubwe between AD 950 and 1250, like their successors in Great Zimbabwe, belonged to the Zincho tradition. Then the Limpopo River was not a political divide, as it is today, but the natural element around which cultures flourished and declined. At its height there were some twenty thousand souls in Mapungubwe. Beads and seashells attest to their status as traders, and gold and other metal artefacts to their skill as smelters and workers of ore.

At the time that excavations began at Mapungubwe, the architect Gerard Moerdyk was serving on the council of the University of Pretoria, having been elected to that body in 1930. The Mapungubwe finds deepened in Moerdyk an interest in African culture, first aroused by a tour to Egypt and the Levant, and from then on he was to pursue the Africanization of his architecture, not only by using indigenous materials, but by employing motifs and symbols with an African origin or association. At this time, when the African origins of Great Zimbabwe were being contested, Moerdyk was adamant, although he did not much admire the workmanship, that it was indeed the product of an indigenous culture.

Moerdyk's first involvement with a project which required a degree of symbolic interpretation was the Merensky Library on the campus of the University of Pretoria. Like the symbolism of the later Voortrekker Monument, which Moerdyk would make widely known through his writings in both the English and the Afrikaans press, the symbolism of the Merensky Library was overt and explicit. The granite was of the African soil and symbolized the great age and immensity of the continent, attributes he associated with Great Zimbabwe. The zigzag stonework band was also derived from and linked the building to Africa. The zigzag is an archetypal symbol of water and fertility found in indigenous African culture, and part of its potency stems from the scarcity of water in the subcontinent. For Moerdyk it was also associated with the Voortrekkers as a chosen people whom God had watched over in the African wilderness.

Many of the symbols in bas-relief on the Library walls Moerdyk himself traced to Zimbabwean influences. The architraves of the entrance depict the crocodile and Zimbabwe bird. The crocodile, as spirit of the water, once again suggests a powerful, fertile culture, while the bird, as spirit of the skies, refers to the spiritual inspiration of the creative writers of Afrikaans (and perhaps of the architect as author of the building). The baboons trooping across the lintel of the door remain symbolically obscure. Perhaps it is no more than an architect's humour – after all, he has sheep in the same position on the Reserve Bank he designed in Bloemfontein.

The curving of the walls to the entrance represents the open book, knowledge revealed, especially biblical knowledge. An open Bible was a feature of old Boer homes, and a Bible opened at a particular verse is always placed on a lectern in Afrikaner churches. If we pursue Moerdyk's symbolism to its conclusion, the verse here must be from the Old Testament, God speaking to His People.



Gerard Moerdyk, Merensky Library, 1933-6, bas-relief of main door architrave.