Micro-Raman spectroscopy of nanomaterials: applications in archaeology

A thesis submitted by

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

Physics

in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences of the University of Pretoria

Promoter: Prof. DJ Brink

April 2008
Micro-Raman spectroscopy of nanomaterials: applications in archaeology.

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Degree: Philosophiae Doctor

SUMMARY

“Nanomaterials” is a generic term used to describe nano-sized crystals and bulk homogenous materials with a structural disorder at the nanoscale. Ancient (and modern) ceramics and glasses derive some of their properties (eg. pliability and low sintering temperature) from the fact that their raw material namely natural clay is nanosized. Furthermore, the pigments used to colour ceramics and glasses need to have particle sizes <500 nm for the object to appear homogenously coloured to the human eye. Raman spectroscopy intrinsically probes chemical bonds and is therefore one of the few techniques that has been proven useful to provide information at the nanoscale. It is an excellent tool to study ceramics and glasses as a Raman spectrum can be used to identify phases, analyse amorphous domains in the silicate network and identify pigments on a nano-scale. The characteristics of a glass, ceramic or ceramic glaze derived through its Raman spectrum can then be linked to the technology used to produce an artefact and in this way provide information about its relative age and provenance. Likewise, the identification of pigments and binders in San rock art might provide information about production techniques and assist in the development of conservation procedures.

In this thesis micro-Raman spectroscopy (with X-ray fluorescence, X-ray powder diffraction, electronmicroscopy and photoluminescence as supportive techniques) was utilised to study archaeological artefacts from the Mapungubwe Collection and San rock art. It was possible to re-date celadon shards excavated on Mapungubwe hill in 1934 to the Yuan or even later Ming dynasty in stead of its original classification as Song. A profile of the glass technology used to produce the Mapungubwe oblates, small trade beads from the “royal burials” on Mapungubwe hill was determined and quite a few unique characteristics of the beads may eventually help to establish their provenance. The possible influence of the presence of rock hyraces at rock art sites on the deterioration of rock art were investigated and during the study very rare polymorphs of CaCO₃ (vaterite and monohydrocalcite) were discovered in rock hyrax urine. This study was extended to analyse a San rock art fragment and another first was the identification of animal fat on the fragment, but the exact origin of the fat has to be verified by similar experiments.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the following people, who in one way or other, have contributed towards the completion of this study:

• Prof. Wolfgang Kiefer, editor of the Journal of Raman Spectroscopy, who in his capacity as chairman of the Steering Committee of the International Conference of Raman Spectroscopy, chose South Africa to host the XVI International Conference on Raman Spectroscopy in 1998, which served as inspiration for this thesis. The confidence he expressed in me by regularly asking me to referee articles for the journal has served as tremendous encouragement.

• Dr. Philippe Colomban, Head of the Laboratoire de Dynamique Interaction et Réactivité, Paris, whose work on ceramic glazes and glass provided the theoretical backbone for a large part of the thesis. His willingness to collaborate with me has provided me with a valuable mentor.

• Prof. Johan Brink, Department of Physics, University of Pretoria for his guidance and assistance throughout this study.

• The Physics Department of the University of Pretoria for funding several conferences and supporting me in the study.

• Me Sian Tiley, curator of the Mapungubwe Museum for her sustained cooperation and help with permits.

• All my co-authors for their collaboration, encouragement and time.

• The staff of the XRF and XRD Laboratory and the Electronmicroscope unit of the University of Pretoria for their help.

• My husband Gerhard, two sons and many friends for their continuous support.
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