

## In Memoriam

### PROFESSOR HANNES ELOFF 1918–2007

Johannes Frederik Eloff was born in a tent on the farm Blinkwater near Munnik on 24 May 1918. He spent his childhood years on the farm Welgevonden near the town of Soekmekeer in what is today known as the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Since childhood he was fascinated by the stories of ancient times and peoples told to him by his father and grandfather, and in the numerous books he read. Many of his playmates were children of the local Tlokwa people from whom he learnt their language and many of their customs. In 1934, after matriculating at the age of sixteen at the Pietersburg High School, he had his first experience of Mapungubwe: he accompanied his father to the recently discovered ancient settlement where archaeological excavations by the University of Pretoria were in progress.

Soon after qualifying as a teacher at the Normal College in Pretoria, his teaching career began when he was appointed as teacher at an English medium school in Johannesburg at the age of nineteen. He was then transferred to a teaching post at a school in Pretoria, where he enrolled for a Bachelor's degree at the Extramural Division of the University of Pretoria while he continued teaching. Apart from his postgraduate studies, Hannes also became the heavyweight boxing champion of the South African universities and served as Vice-chairman of the Extramural Students Council at the University of Pretoria. He then became part-time lecturer in anthropology at the Extramural Division of the University. He enrolled for a Master of Arts degree in anthropology and focused his studies on anthropological research on the Tlokwa people. He included archaeology as one of his examination subjects.

After marrying Mara Marais in 1946, Hannes served for some time as Superintendent of the Atteridgeville Township and in 1947 became manager of the new Department of Welfare and Recreation. He changed his academic research to family life in the Atteridgeville Township and completed his MA degree with a dissertation on this topic. He was appointed as

full-time lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pretoria in 1949, where he incorporated archaeology into the anthropology course. During 1953 and 1954, Hannes participated in systematic excavations of the Department of Anthropology at Mapungubwe.

In 1957, while attending a conference on urbanization in London, Hannes visited several archaeology departments at universities and archaeological sites in Britain and Europe and participated in excavations in Rome. In later years he assisted with excavations in other African countries, including Zimbabwe and Zambia, where he worked with well-known archaeologists such as Desmond Clark, Brian Fagan, Roger Summers and C.K. Cooke. From 1967 until the late 1970s, Hannes and his students undertook annual excavations at the Bushman Rock Shelter, near Ohrigstad. In the early 1960s Hannes participated in an excavation of the stone-walled Iron Age site of Makahane in the northern Kruger National Park, where he worked jointly with the late historian J.B. de Vaal. In 1967 Hannes expanded archaeology at the University of Pretoria to a two-year major subject, which included practical fieldwork as part of the course, and he and his students then initiated a series of annual excavations on the Southern Terrace at Mapungubwe and on K2 from 1968 to 1970.

During those eventful years, as a member of the Historical Monuments Council of South Africa, Hannes became intensely involved in heritage conservation. In 1969 he introduced an Honours degree in archaeology at the University of Pretoria. The Department of Archaeology was established at the University in 1970 with Hannes as the head and professor. He is the co-editor and co-author of a book on South African ethnographic studies that was published in 1972. One of his major contributions was to the research on the Iron Age capitals of K2 and Mapungubwe. This work was conducted after he received a major grant from the Human Sciences Research Council in 1970 for a full-time research project on



*Professor Hannes Eloff (left) explains the history of Mapungubwe to fascinated visitors on the summit of Mapungubwe Hill, c. 1970.*

Mapungubwe from 1971 to 1973. This project eventually resulted in a number of scientific publications, displays and post-graduate studies by several of his students from 1974 onwards.

Hannes had always emphasized the close and important link between the interdisciplinary study of human societies and their traditions, the conservation of cultural heritage and heritage education. Hannes remained an active member of the National Monuments Council until 1989. It was during the 1980s that the major Iron Age sites of Mapungubwe and K2 were proclaimed National Monuments by the National Monuments Council. As chairman of a statutory committee for the development of conservation organizations at the time, he also helped to lay the foundation for the conservation of the cultural heritage of rural communities in several regions in South Africa.

At the request of the National Parks Board, Hannes undertook an archaeological survey and excavations of the Iron Age site known as Masorini in the Kruger National Park near Phalaborwa from 1974 to 1977, where an ancestral community of the present-day BaPhalaborwa had lived and produced iron. This project resulted in the Masorini Open Air Museum. During this time, Hannes had already been involved in the development of several museums and museum services. He served on the Council of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum from 1971 to 1983 and on the Council of the Transvaal Provincial Museum Services. As chairman of the Pilgrim's Rest Development and Works Commission, he promoted the conservation of the historical town of Pilgrim's Rest as a museum complex. He participated in the establishment of a course in museology at the University of Pretoria, and for many years lectured on the role of archaeology in museums. An important part of his legacy to South African heritage research and conservation is the significant number of his students who became directors, curators or researchers in South African museums. Hannes was a member of the committee on African studies of the Human Sciences Research Council, and a member of the Academy of Arts and Science during the 1980s.

Since his retirement at the end of 1984, Hannes focused his attention on heritage conservation, and an archaeological field survey in the Kruger National Park at the request of the National Parks Board. In 1997, when he was approaching the

age of 80, his active life as a mentor to his students and his contributions to heritage conservation was recognized and commemorated by a publication entitled *Studies in Honour of Professor J.F. Eloff*, written by several of his former students and published by the National Cultural History Museum.

Throughout his life, Hannes Eloff experienced and believed in the value of academic mentorship and in the spiritual and cultural values of people and their traditions. These convictions were realized, thanks to him and those who supported him, with the establishment of archaeology and the enrichment of anthropology at the University of Pretoria, and with the development of museums and heritage conservation in urban and rural environments. A number of his students became dedicated lecturers, researchers and conservationists at academic institutions, and in the museum services that Hannes had helped to establish.

The most important single project of his career was the archaeological excavation of the Greefswald sites of Mapungubwe and K2 between 1968 and 1984, which contributed directly and significantly to the Greefswald Archaeological Project of the University of Pretoria. The results of the Eloff project included a substantial field report, research by his post-graduate students, scientific and popular publications and the ongoing prominent role of the University of Pretoria in the presentation of the ancient African kingdom of Mapungubwe to the modern world. In this, Hannes prepared the way for a new generation of students, researchers and conservationists to make further contributions to the unravelling, the conservation and the appreciation of this important episode in the history of African society.

Before Hannes Eloff passed away on 4 August 2007 at the age of 89, he left to all of us this message that he used to convey to many of his students at Mapungubwe and that embodies his passion and lifetime of study and experience:

*These stone walls, potsherds and other relics from the past that are now lying so quietly before us are the remains of a once living and thriving community with a respected king or queen, now long gone and forgotten; people to be understood and appreciated and their heritage to be cherished and preserved by us who came later.*

**Andrie Meyer**  
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